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**Producing and Collecting for Empire:  
African Textiles in the V&A 1852-2000**

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Submitted to University of the Arts London for PhD  
Examination

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Research Centre for Transnational Art, Identity and  
Nation (TrAIN) at UAL and the Victoria and Albert  
Museum.

**Volume 1**

## **Abstract**

### **Producing and collecting for Empire: African textiles in the V&A 1850-2000**

The aim of this project is to examine the African textiles in the Victoria and Albert Museum and how they reflect the historical and cultural relationship between Britain and Africa. As recently as 2009 the V&A's collecting policy stated 'Objects are collected from all major artistic traditions ... The Museum does not collect historic material from Oceania and Africa south of the Sahara' (V&A 2012 Appendix 1). Despite this a significant number of Sub-Saharan African textiles have come into the V&A during the museum's history. The V&A also has a large number of textiles from North Africa, both aspects of the collection are examined.

The division between North and Sub-Saharan Africa and between 'art' and 'ethnographic' museum collections is crucial to understanding the African textiles in the V&A. The V&A began collecting North African textiles in 1852 and went on to build a strong collection, particularly embroideries from the urban areas. The museum also acquired some Sub-Saharan African textiles during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. During the 1920s the Textiles Department began to consider whether textiles from certain areas should be classed as ethnography. This was the most active period for collecting North African embroidery but the same process led to the exclusion and removal of Sub-Saharan African textiles. After World War II the Circulation Department actively collected West African textiles to tour to art colleges. The closure of the Department caused many of these textiles to be de-accessioned. The V&A has also collected textiles produced in Britain for sale in

Africa as examples of British design. In their various ways all these textiles reflect aspects of Britain's relationship with Africa, which cannot help but be expressed through the collection of a national institution such as the V&A.



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**List of Acronyms**

CIS – The V&A museum's Catalogue Information System, the official electronic catalogue (superseded by CMS)

CMS – The V&A museum's current Catalogue Management System, the official electronic catalogue

ODNB – Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

MAA - Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge

V&A – The Victoria and Albert Museum and its predecessor institutions.

## Introduction

When this research was begun The Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) referred to itself on its own website and other publicity as the ‘The world’s greatest museum of art and design with collections in their scope and diversity’

([http://vam.ac.uk/your\\_visit/va\\_museums/index.html](http://vam.ac.uk/your_visit/va_museums/index.html) (accessed February 2008)).<sup>1</sup>

Despite this claim until 2009 the official collection policy of the V&A read ‘Objects are collected from all major artistic traditions of Europe and Asia. The museum does not normally collect pre-European settlement material from the Americas and Australasia. The Museum does not collect historic material from Africa South of the Sahara.’ (V&A Capacity Building and Cultural Ownership Report [2009?]). The aim of this research is to understand why the V&A excluded material from Sub-Saharan Africa, and why given this apparent exclusion, the textiles they have are in the collection. It will also look at the V&A’s collection of North African textiles to understand why the two regions were treated so differently. Fundamental to the distinction between North and Sub-Saharan Africa is the division between decorative art and ethnography collections. However, this research will seek to show that these divisions became entrenched only gradually and fairly late, during the 1920s rather than the nineteenth century. It will explore how the relationship between Britain and Africa is reflected in the museum’s collection of African textiles and seek to understand how the V&A both reflected and contributed towards an understanding of Africa throughout its history. I will also be looking at the museum’s interest in and acquisition of textiles produced in Britain for the West African market. These textiles form an important counterpoint to the

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<sup>1</sup> Although the V&A continues to refer to itself as ‘The world’s greatest museum of art and design’ ([www.vam.ac.uk](http://www.vam.ac.uk)) the second half of the quote is no longer used. ‘

textiles from Africa, as they reflect another aspect of Britain's relationship with parts of Africa.

The rationale behind this thesis is to understand the V&A's attitude towards collecting Textiles from Africa throughout its history. We need to understand when the V&A was excluding African textiles from its collection, why they were doing this and how this reflects and perpetuates Britain's attitude towards Africa and African people. In addition although the African textile collection at the V&A is not large it does contain some important pieces and these deserve to be better known.

The focus of this project is the V&A's collection and not African textiles more generally. Although the Textiles department also acquired other material such as leather goods, shoes etc these will not be looked at as they are not textiles. I have also excluded the carpets in the collection, partly because of the amount of textiles that needed to be seen and partly because of difficulty accessing these pieces. The period covered is from the museum's founding in 1852 until the year 2000, when a process was begun to reassess the V&A's relationship with Africa. This research is part of that process. This thesis also does not cover the textiles or dress of British people of African descent, a topic covered by the V&A in two exhibitions *Street Style* (1994) and *Black British Style* (2004)

## **Material Culture**

It cannot be ignored that the body of sources at the centre of this research are material objects rather than written sources and for this reason it has been

necessary to make use of methodologies developed for the study of material culture. Daniel Miller has defined the study of material culture as ‘simply the study of human social and environmental relationships through the evidence of people’s construction of their material world’ (Miller 1994:13). Material culture as an idea was closely tied to the development of museums and anthropology as an academic discipline in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Objects in museum collections were asked to represent or ‘stand in for’ the people who had produced them. They were also used as the basis for building an understanding of the world, by categorising and ordering objects foreign peoples and their societies could be classified according to the theories of social Darwinism or diffusionism. As these theories fell out of fashion anthropology turned away from material culture studies during the middle of the twentieth century (Miller 1994:13-18).

However, by the 1980s a whole range of disciplines such as anthropology, archaeology and art history were beginning to ask new questions about objects and how they functioned within societies. Much of the new thinking about material culture arose in response to developments in the study of language by Saussure who saw words as arbitrary sign. Christopher Tilley explained Saussure’s theory thus:

The sign only gains meaning diacritically because the meaning is derived from the system in which it is constituted as different from other signs ... Meaning therefore resides in a system of relationships between signs and not in the signs themselves. A sign considered in isolation would be meaningless. Furthermore, the meaning of a sign is not predetermined, but is a matter of cultural and historical convention. Consequently, it does not matter how a signifier appears, so long as it preserves its difference from other signifiers.

(Tilley 1994: 67)

Tilley goes on to argue that objects could be seen as signs and that their meaning also relied on relationships led to a fundamental shift in archaeology. It also contributed to a changing understanding of material culture in which meaning was understood to be produced by arranging objects in sets (physically or mentally).

Susan Pearce has argued that due to this interdependence objects need to be understood in three different ways. Firstly as ‘lumps of the world’ that have been turned into artefacts by a social process, secondly as signs and symbols and finally as meaning. Meaning is assigned by the society the object is in (Pearce 1995:14-16). Objects can be understood in all three ways at any given time and a change in an objects circumstances, for example, being accessioned by a museum, will change the way the object functions and is understood.

In order to tease out information from objects it is necessary to adopt a material culture studies approach. Jules Prown has argued that: ‘most of us are functionally illiterate when it comes to interpreting information encoded in objects’ (Prown 1994: 133). A number of models have been developed for the study of material culture to help overcome this. Susan Pearce’s model for artefact studies which draws heavily on archaeological and anthropological practice to create a new model for studying museum artefacts has been crucial in devising a methodology for dealing with the textiles (Pearce 1994: 2009: 126). The importance of this model is that it starts with the object and then works outwards. Pearce divides an object’s properties into four sections, namely

material, history, environment and significance. She also considers what other studies and analyses can be consulted at each stage to properly understand the object's properties and arrive at a rounded interpretation. (Pearce 1994: 129).

The examination of the material involves close study of the textile itself including construction, design and ornament; this may involve comparison with other known textiles. There are at least three stages in the history of an object in the V&A, its making and original use, how it came to be in the museum and its treatment afterward. The museum archives are crucial for uncovering as much of this history as possible. The textiles changing environment also needs to be considered, this can range from the environment in which the object was produced to where and how it is stored or displayed in the museum. It is also important to consider the significance of the object in all three stages of its history as outlined above. Having been through all four stages it is possible to arrive at an interpretation of an object. In order to assess the significance of and effectively interpret an object it is necessary to make use of the existing literature and theory on the subject. In order to understand the African textile collection department in the V&A it will be necessary to consider the development of African textile studies, the history of the V&A and collections. The development of museum studies will be discussed in the conclusion because the new understanding of museums that was evolved during the 1990s through museum studies has led directly to topics such as this being researched and is therefore of relevance to my conclusions.

## **Collections and Collecting**

Collection studies as an academic field began to gain momentum in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Several important books were published during this time such as Elsner and Cardinal's *The Cultures of Collecting* (1994) and *Interpreting Objects and Collections* (1994) edited by Susan Pearce. This 'Reader in Museum Studies' gathered together much of the writing on the subject so far. Central to the development of collection studies was the *Journal of the History of Collections* founded by Oliver Impey and Arthur Macgregor in 1989. It is worth noting that in 2012 it went from producing two issues a year to three suggesting that the field continues to grow.

Collecting needs to be defined and, in particular, distinguished from accumulating or hoarding objects. The difference between these two groups is that collecting involves selectivity and the imposition of a form of order onto the objects, although this order may be highly subjective. In 1990 Belk et al defined collecting as:

the selective, active, and longitudinal acquisition, possession and disposition of an interrelated set of differentiated objects (material things, ideas, beings, or experiences) that contribute to and derive extraordinary meaning from the entity (the collection) that this set is perceived to constitute  
(Belk et al 1990:8 as quoted in Pearce 1995:15).

This is a useful definition because it shows that collecting takes place over time, that the objects are interrelated and involves not only acquiring objects but what happens afterwards as well. The emphasis on the fact that a collection is more

than the sum of its parts is also useful; an object's status is changed by its presence in the collection. This is true of the African textiles in the V&A, these objects are being studied because they are in the V&A. Susan Pearce has questioned the notion that collecting is always active, suggesting that personal collections can creep up on people. For a museum collecting is always active (Pearce 1995:15). In order for an object to be officially part of the collection it needs to be accessioned, a process has to be performed. However, there are degrees of activity and passivity and the acquisition of textiles from Sub-Saharan Africa by the V&A was generally fairly passive. Objects were acquired when they were offered not sought out, and in some cases were in the museum for some years, if not decades before being made officially part of the collection.

Collections studies considers not just how institutions like museums collect but also how and why individuals collect, for example Baudrillard's essay 'The System of Collecting' (Baudrillard, 1994). How personal and public collections are linked is another area of study. Although many of the African textiles in the V&A collection were donated they do not seem to have come from collectors with a strong interest in African textiles, rather they often seem to have ended up with them as gifts as bequests themselves.

In 1991 Pearce identified three areas of collection studies in relation to museums. Firstly she suggested collection policies needed to be looked at from both a practical and a philosophical angle. What should museums collect and what should they exclude and why and how can they dispose of material. It is also necessary to consider how the documentation systems of the museum effect what



sort of research can be done on the collection. The second important area of study is the history of collections and collection: ‘The focus is upon the tracing of acquisition and dispersals, the editing of relevant surviving documents and the biographies of collectors, together with themes like the relationship between collections and the idea of the museum’ (Pearce 1994: 194). Finally the nature of collections and collecting itself – why do people and institutions collect at all (Pearce 1994: 193-4). The first two aspects identified by Pearce are central to understanding why the V&A was both collecting and excluding material from Africa at various points throughout its history. The research will attempt to answer these questions through detailed archival research although it is worth remembering that, as she points out, the museum archive itself impacts upon how well these questions can be answered.

In 1994 Elsner and Cardinal wrote that ‘Classification precedes collection’ (Elsner and Cardinal 1994:1). In order to be either collected or rejected an object has to be classified by the in order for the collector to decide whether or not it deserves to be in the collection and its correct place in it. Classification works to exclude as well as include. Elsner and Cardinal went on to explain that:

if classification is the mirror of collective humanity’s thoughts and perceptions, then collecting is its material embodiment. Collecting is classification lived, experienced in three dimensions. The history of collecting is thus the narrative of how human beings have striven to accommodate, to appropriate and to extend the taxonomies and systems of knowledge they have inherited.  
(Elsner and Cardinal 1994:2)

The V&A, as a national museum, is deeply implicated in perpetuating ‘systems of knowledge.’ By deciding African objects should not be in the collection they make a value judgement about the objects themselves and the people who made

them. In order to understand this it is necessary to consider the museum in the light of post-colonial theory.

### **The Post-colonial Debate**

Edward Said's groundbreaking work *Orientalism* was published in 1978. Said drew on Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony and Michel Foucault's ideas about the relationship between knowledge and power in order to analyse the binary opposition between 'the Occident' and 'the Orient.' He argued that the orient was viewed as 'the other'; European identity was defined against it and found to be superior. European experts who wrote about the Middle East and India perpetuated this idea of 'them' and 'us' rather than undermining it, and thereby contributed to a stereotyped view of the Orient. For Said the increased academic interest in 'the Orient' during the nineteenth century is linked to and implicated in the expansion of empire. Europe's knowledge of the East is closely tied both to extending European power in 'the Orient' and justifying it.

Said began *Orientalism* by discussing Arthur James Balfour's speech to the House of Commons on June 13 1910 in which Balfour argued for and defended Britain's presence and involvement in Egypt. Said argues that

Two great themes dominate his [Balfour's] remarks...knowledge and power...As Balfour justifies the necessity for British occupation of Egypt, supremacy in his mind is associated with "our" knowledge of Egypt and not principally with military or economic power. Knowledge to Balfour means surveying a civilisation from its origins to its prime to its decline and it means being able to do that... To have such knowledge of a thing is to dominate it, to have authority over it. (Said 2003: 32)

A consequence of this knowing was to export to the British colonies the English language, literature and systems of knowledge as part of the civilising mission. The

flip-side of this was for the British to collect the indigenous art and artefacts of its empire and display them at the metropolitan centre. It is impossible to ignore how deeply implicated the V&A was in this process. The V&A's role in displaying the spoils of direct and indirect empire in India, China and Japan and the Middle East has been studied in some depth but very little has been written about the African objects in the V&A. An exception to this is Tim Barringer who included a brief discussion about the display of objects from the military campaigns against Meqdala (1868) and Kumasi (1873-4) in his essay 'The South Kensington Museum and the Imperial Project' (Barringer 1998: 21-22).

It is also worth noting that Said's discussion of Orientalism starts with a reference to Egypt. For Said and the 'Orientalist' scholars he writes about, Egypt is part of the Orient, part of the Middle Eastern world. Egypt is part of the Middle Eastern world but it is also African and this is rarely acknowledged. Egypt is often treated differently to the rest of Africa, and its treatment in the V&A's collection is no exception. Egyptian material culture (modern as well as ancient) is accorded a higher status than other African cultures; a troubling hierarchy of cultures starts to emerge.

Said's work can be criticised for a number of reasons. The binary opposition between the east and west is simplistic. Said talks about 'the West' or 'the Occident' but this can't be any more clearly defined than 'the Orient.' There is no historic specificity; it assumes the government at the centre, on the periphery, merchants and academics all worked hand in hand to produce a view of the East rather than a competing series of ideas about the East. Said also does not consider the influence of local people who to some degree co-operated with the imperial ambitions of Europe on the view of the Orient, or the extent to which they may have

been able to manipulate this for their own ends. However, *Orientalism* remains an extraordinary and important book for demonstrating how subjective the things we think we know are.

One of the potential problems with post-colonial theory is to see all post-colonial nations as essentially the same and therefore to lose sight of the importance of specific historical conditions and thus assume that people are still defined, above all, by their involvement with (predominantly) European powers. In *Nation and Narration* Homi K. Bhabha challenged this idea and went on to explore the ambivalent and antagonistic relationship between the colonised and those who sought to dominate them (Bhabha 1990).

In *The Location of Culture* (Bhabha 1994) Bhabha argues that Western thought has relied too much on antagonistic binary oppositions of the kind that Said described in *Orientalism*, such as centre vs. periphery and civilised vs. savage. Bhabha argues that we need to move away from these kinds of oppositions. 'The production of meaning requires that these two places be mobilized in the passage through a Third Space' (Bhabha 1994: 36). The Third Space is an in-between space that encourages interpretation to be more ambivalent, and allows for the displacement of dominant 'Western' ideas. Ultimately the Third Space allows for a transnational understanding of culture based on hybridity. Bhabha hopes that 'by exploring this Third Space we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as ourselves' (Bhabha 1994: 39). Craig Clunas has drawn on Bhabha's theories in his examination of the V&A's collection of East Asian art (Clunas 1997: 231). Clunas's work, in turn, provides a useful model for assessing the V&A and its attitude to Africa.

Another important development in post-colonial theory is the idea of the sub-altern. During the 1970s and 1980s historians started to look at ways to study people who had traditionally been written out of the historical record by the politically or culturally dominant group. It was felt that history should be more concerned with the historical experience of ordinary people and of all human activity rather than just the actions of the political elite. This approach was known as 'history from below' and it sought to find historical evidence of people not usually thought of as leaving historical traces. This involved both using a wider range of sources and using 'traditional' sources in an innovative way to reveal things about the lives of ordinary people. This approach was appealing to people studying the history of parts of Asia and Africa where colonial written records dominated. Historians sought to understand the experiences of the subject peoples rather than the actions of the colonial oppressor. This was known as sub-altern studies. However, Gayatri Spivak has questioned whether it is really possible to recover a sub-altern voice. Certainly when it comes to the African textiles in the V&A it is hard to hear any voice, or understand any history except that of the museum itself. It is difficult to study any aspect of African history through the V&A collection except the story of the Museum's interaction with various parts of Africa.

James Clifford argues that although the power relationship between the colonised and the coloniser is inherently unequal in a museum, the museum is still able to act as a 'contact zone.' Clifford argues that the 'cultural action, the making and remaking of identities, takes place in the contact zones, along the policed and transgressive intercultural frontiers of nations, peoples, locales' (Clifford 1997: 7). He sees museums as 'contact zones,' a dynamic space that allows for interaction and dialogue as opposed to a site that constructs and represents identity in a

straightforward or dictatorial fashion. This is not a straightforward or easy relationship. Clifford characterizes it as ‘an ongoing historical, political, moral relationship – a power charged set of exchanges of push and pull’ (Clifford 1997: 192). However, that a museum will act as a ‘contact zone’ cannot be taken for granted; strategies have to be adopted by the museum that allow the ‘space’ for museums to function in this manner.

Said, Spivak and Bhabha’s theories all come from their study of literature rather than material culture, but their theories have been of great interest to people involved in museum studies as they grapple with museum’s complicated historic relationship to imperial power and cultural dominance. Barringer and Tom Flynn acknowledge the influence of Spivak, Bhabha and Said on this element of museum studies in their introduction to *Colonialism and the Object*, a collection of essays that sought to understand ‘the influence of colonialism, its ideologies and power relations, on the ways in which objects are understood’ (Barringer and Flynn 1998: 1). Ruth Phillips has recently argued that many museums that display African material have responded to post-colonial critiques and the results of this can now be clearly seen in various gallery spaces (Phillips 2004).

### **African Textiles**

In a paper presented at a symposium on History, Design and Craft in West African Strip-Woven cloth, at the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution in 1988 John Picton said that ‘African art studies have “traditionally” given pride of place to sculpture and its related forms, such as masquerade’ (Picton 1992: 13). He argued that the focus on sculpture had been at the expense of textiles, despite the fact that textile production continued as part of a vibrant and developing tradition and continued to be produced predominantly for a local rather than an export market. In

Picton's view '[t]his suggests that textiles might provide more effective evidence of local aesthetic and artistic sensibilities than the better-known medium of sculpture in wood and other materials' (Picton 1992: 15). Roy Sieber went on to explain in his introduction to the published version of Picton's paper that

the ranking of art into "fine" and "decorative" is insidious, for it echoes western prejudices and inflicts a hierarchy on African Arts wherein the crafts are considered inferior to sculpture...As a result, the technical, historical, aesthetic, and contextual aspects of textiles have been too little considered.  
(Sieber 1992: 9)

This was an argument Seiber had been making since 1965.

a tremendous amount of work remains to be done in the study of the arts. Shockingly little has been published on any area except sculpture; a situation which stems, no doubt, from the ethno-centric heritage of Western aesthetic attitudes. Next to nothing exists in print about architecture, weaving, pottery, painting, or costume.  
(Seiber 1965: 443)

The division between fine and decorative art has been a question that the V&A has grappled with since its inception and is linked to the division between the ethnographic and the artistic (whether fine or decorative) that lead to the exclusion of African textiles from the V&A.

The first writing on African textiles comes from European travellers to Africa who would often include descriptions of African dress in their accounts of their time in Africa. Although some occasionally make reference to textile manufacture, trade and ritual use these early accounts generally focus on dress. For example, in James Edward Alexander's *An Expedition of Discovery into the Interior of Africa* originally published in 1838 he records descriptions of the clothes of both the men and the women he encounters (Alexander 1967). These accounts function more as primary sources than as secondary literature and have been valuable sources for historians.

In some cases donor or vendors of African textiles to the V&A wrote accounts of their travels in Africa, for example Robert Bontine Cunningham Graham, E. Barclay and R.L. Playfair. Another set of books that function as primary sources for this project are the descriptive catalogues of works in the museum produced by the V&A. Mittar, in relation to the India collections, has pointed out that:

If the India Museum was intimately bound up with colonial imperatives of power and control, we may learn much about that imperial ideology through the ways the collection was presented to the English public and described in contemporary guidebooks.  
(Mittar 1997: 221)

While few of the Sub-Saharan African textiles were put on display, the many guides and catalogues relating to the North African material have been a very useful and interesting source in analysing the museum's attitude to and understanding of textiles from North Africa. *A Catalogue of Algerian Embroideries* (V&A 1915 and 1935) and Alan Summerly Cole's *A Supplemental Descriptive Catalogue of Tapestry-woven and Embroidered Egyptian Textiles, Acquired for the South Kensington Museum between 1886 and June 1890* (Cole 1891) are both examples of this type of work.

It was not until the early part of the twentieth century that more detailed accounts of African textiles start to appear. This corresponds to an increasing interest at this time in many aspects of African material culture, which is itself the result of the expansion of anthropology and archaeology as academic fields. Examples of this sort of writing would be H. Ling Roth's *Studies in Primitive looms* published in 1918 and Grace Crowfoot's work on textiles in the Sudan and Egypt from 1931 (Crowfoot 1978).



During the 1960s as African countries gained independence from the European powers that had colonised them, there was a renewed intellectual interest in Africa and a positive reassessment of African art and culture (McCready 1978: 2). An important development at this time was the publication of work by African scholars at African universities which often had a nationalistic or celebratory quality. An example of this that relates specifically to textiles is the work of A.K. Quarcoo on Ghanaian Adinkra cloth (Quarcoo 1972).

Another important development and boost to interest in African textiles at this time was the exhibition *African Textiles and Decorative Arts*, curated by Roy Sieber at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1972. This exhibition featured many aspects of African art but sought to put textiles firmly at the centre of an understanding of African aesthetics (Sieber 1972).

In terms of African textile literature, the results of this positive reassessment of African culture start to be seen in the 1970s with the publication of a number of descriptive survey works relating to different textile traditions in Africa. For example, the publication of Venice Lamb's *West African Weaving* (1975) and Joanne Eicher's work on Nigerian textiles in 1976. Picton has described the later work of Venice and Alastair Lamb (Lamb and Lamb 1981, 1984) as providing 'extraordinary documentary evidence' and argued that by doing so they helped to challenge the assumption that sculpture should be viewed as the pre-eminent African art (Picton 1992: 15).

Alongside and in response to this descriptive literature, more analytical works also started to appear. In 1979 Picton and John Mack published *African Textiles* which

drew on both their own fieldwork in various parts of Africa and the collection of the British Museum. The book was republished in 1989 with a few changes and some additions. *African Textiles* focused on the technology of textiles; how the textiles were actually made. Picton and Mack argued that without understanding this first it was impossible to study or analyse other aspects of African textiles such as pattern and design. Pattern and design are, to a great extent, dependent upon the technology used to create the textiles. Although the focus of the book was technology it also sought to put the textiles in their social and cultural context. Spring and Hudson focused more on the social and cultural context of North Africa textiles in their 1995 book.

Other writers at this time were looking at many different aspects of African textiles as well as studying the production of specific types of textile in greater detail. For example Simmonds and Barbour's detailed study of the production of Adire cloth in Nigeria (Barbour and Simmonds 1971), Georges Meurant on Kuba Cloth (Meurant 1986), Sally Forelli on Berber Weaving (Forelli and Harries 1977) and Tunisian Weaving (Reswick 1985). Topics covered at this time included cotton and imperialism (Johnson, 1974), the role of women (Picton 1980), textiles and myth (Dille 1987), the cloth trade (Aronson 1980), the role of dyes (Polakoff 1982), design (Dendel 1974) and the use of cloth as currency (Johnson 1980).

In February of 1988 there was a Symposium organized by the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC called *History, Design and Craft in West African Strip Woven Cloth* at which Picton acknowledged the burgeoning interest in African textiles at that time (Picton 1992). The number of high quality papers produced around one aspect of textile production in West Africa showed how much the scholarship on African textiles had developed over the

preceding decade and the extent to which textiles had by now become central to understanding African art and aesthetics generally. Of particular interest at the conference was a paper by Peggy Stoltz Gilfoy about the links between North and West African textiles which for so long had been regarded as entirely separate.

Textile-producing and –importing cultures throughout history have integrated foreign elements into their traditions ... [An] example is the influence of North African Textiles on those made south of the Sahara. The desert did not deter trade any more than the Indian Ocean deterred the Europe-East Indies textile trade.  
(Gilfoy 1992: 83)

In the same paper Gilfoy also wrote that ‘In the study of textile history, we often fail to take into account the tremendous prestige attached to exotic imported goods’ (Gilfoy 1992: 83). This is important to remember in relation to many of the textiles in the V&A collection which are often made of materials that would have been brought to Africa by European traders. These ‘exotic’ materials were often highly prized and used in prestigious clothing. They would later have been brought back to Britain and again celebrated for their exotic’ appearance.

At the 1988 symposium Picton pointed out that despite this new and growing interest in African textiles there was still a great deal of work to be done. Since then there has been an increase in the amount and variety of work being done with regard to all aspects of African textiles. It is no longer possible to argue that this is a neglected topic. Similarly to the interest in the 1970s this increase can be seen in general interest books, more analytical works and exhibitions.

As well as increased academic interest in African textiles there has also been increased interest from the general public. This is shown by the success of general interest books about African textiles such as John Gillow’s *African textiles: colour and creativity across a continent* (Gillow 2003) and the increasing number of exhibitions that are either devoted to or include African textiles. In 1995 there was

an exhibition at London's Barbican Centre called Technology, Tradition and Lurex that argued that far from being a static traditional art that was under threat from the modern world, textiles were an important and vibrant part of contemporary African culture able to respond to changing materials and changing social demands (Bickford 1999). The interest in many aspects of African textiles continues, as is shown by recent specialist exhibitions at the Horniman and the British Museum about Nigerian Adire and Ghanaian factory produced cloth respectively. Textiles also featured prominently in shows about African art such as the 1995 Exhibition Africa: the Art of a continent at the Royal Academy of Arts. It is no longer possible to argue that textiles are viewed as the poor cousin of sculpture. The Angaza Afrika: African Art Now exhibition held at the October gallery in 2008 featured a number of artists who work with textiles. The same year The Essential Art of African Textiles: Design Without End an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York combined the textile based works of contemporary African artists with older textiles from their own collection and textiles from the Beving collection at the British Museum (LaGamma and Giuntini 2008).

The British Museum has continued to explore their extensive African textile collection through publications based on their collection as well as exhibitions. This started in 1995 with a study of North African Textiles (Spring and Hudson 1995) which represents one of the least well known aspects of the British Museum's African textile collection. More recently the British Museum has produced a series called Fabric Folios (Gillow 2001, Spring and Hudson 2002) whose aim is to showcase parts of the British Museum collection from specific parts of the world in order to provide inspiration to artists and designers. These books reflect both a

wider and increasing interest in African textiles and the importance of the British Museum's collection to this burgeoning interest.

Current academic writing about African textiles takes into account recent theoretical developments and combines it with detailed study of particular traditions. A recent book which combined both of these aspects is Victoria Rovine's study of Bogolan cloth from Mali which draws on the theories of Igor Kopytoff and Arjan Appadurai to produce a cultural biography of Bogolan that takes into account a diversity of interpretations relating to Bogolan cloth as both a traditional craft and a thriving contemporary art with links to the fashion world both in Mali and further afield (Rovine 2001). The idea of the social life or cultural biography of objects developed by Appadurai and Kopytoff (1986) is a useful tool for understanding objects and their changing meanings. Appadurai explains the idea as 'appropriate to specific things, as they move through different hands, contexts, and uses, thus accumulating a specific biography or set of biographies' (Appadurai 1986: 34). This approach allows that by looking at the life of an object in depth it is possible to understand something about the community who made and used the object as well as the changing meaning of an object brought about by moving from one context to another, not least its entry into a museum.

Other important developments in the field are detailed social and economic histories of the people involved in textile production in West Africa (Byfield 2002), the role of textiles in religion (Renne and Agbaje-Williams 2005), historical studies of textiles in West Africa (Kriger 2006), work on embroidery in North Africa (Stone 1985 and Denamur 2003) and how social change was reflected in the design of hand-woven Ewe textiles during both the colonial and post-colonial period (Kraamer 2005). The place of Africa in the overall global textile trade has also been addressed

from a variety of perspectives across many parts of the continent. For example, Tranberg Hansen has studied in some depth Saluala, or the second hand clothing trade in Zambia to understand what it means to the people who wear it (2000). David T. Doris has explored the fate of offcuts from American textile factories in Southern Nigeria in *Destiny World: Textile Casualties in Southern Nigeria* (Doris: 2006).

Dress history is another important area with regard to the African textiles in the V&A. The majority of the V&A's African textiles, particularly those from sub-Saharan Africa are clothing. Crucial to the development of African dress as a study area was Joanne Eicher producing a bibliography of sub-Saharan African dress in 1970. In the introduction to the bibliography Eicher points out the extent to which sub-Saharan African dress had been excluded from dress surveys such as Blanche Payne's *History of Costume* (1965) and Francois Boucher's *20,000 Years of Fashion* (1967). Eicher suggests that the lack of interest in African dress might be attributable to the stereotype of the 'Naked Savage' (Eicher 1970). She also points out that North African dress is included. These are similar divisions and assumptions to those that shaped the formation of the V&A collection.

Eicher returned to the topic of African dress in 1995 when she edited a volume of essays called *Dress and Ethnicity: Change Across Space and Time* (1995).

Although this book was not specifically about African dress it included several essays about aspects of dress from the Niger delta, Botswana, Swaziland and a piece by Eicher herself about Kalabari dress. Other important contributions to writing about African dress have been *Clothing and Difference* (Hendrickson 1996) and *Fashioning Africa* (2004), a collection of essays edited by Jean Allman that dealt

with the political and symbolic aspects of African dress in the twentieth century. While the more recent *African Dress: Fashion, Agency, Performance* edited by Tranberg Hansen and Soyini Mandison focussed more on the performative qualities of dress. As the titles suggest African dress is increasingly being understood as part of the global fashion system. Leslie Rabine has looked at this in her 2002 book *The Global Circulation of African Fashion*.

As well as textiles produced in Africa, the V&A also has a collection of textiles produced in Britain, or by British companies, especially for the West African market during the first half of the twentieth century. These factory produced printed cottons are an important aspect of both British and African textile history during the nineteenth and twentieth century. The sale of large amounts of these European produced cottons impacted on African fashion and textile production, although not always in the way the European exporters had anticipated. Marion Johnson has studied how exported British printed cotton and Nigerian raw cotton came together in colonial policy during the early twentieth century (Johnson 1974). Britain hoped that Nigeria would supply Britain with cheap cotton for the Lancashire cotton industry and also be a profitable market for the printed cloths these factories produced.

These 'African' textiles were very important to the Lancashire cotton industry. Frederika Launert (2002) has pointed out that the majority of goods produced in the Lancashire textile factories were sold in the 'overseas market' but that this had been of less interest to design historians than the 'home trade.' Launert's PhD thesis focuses on the role of design in the Lancashire cotton industry's success in West Africa between 1900 and 1939 and argues that the long established trade and

imperial links between Britain and West Africa allowed designers to respond successfully to consumer demands. The Africans who bought European produced cottons were not passive recipients of whatever the Europeans offered, rather they were sophisticated consumers who chose and rejected products with great care.

Christopher Steiner has seen in these printed cottons the potential to see both what Europeans imagined would appeal to an African market and also to understand ‘the manner in which Africans responded to European interpretations of African tastes and desires’ (Steiner 1972: 91). For Steiner the wax printed cottons offer a view of Africa during the colonial period that rarely appears in the written sources of the time. If these textiles offer a view of the relationship between Britain and Africa at the time of their production then the inclusion of these textiles in the V&A collection provides another dimension to that view. It is as examples of Britain’s industrial and design prowess that these cottons were accessioned into the V&A collection, but they are a fascinating counterpoint to the textiles made in Africa and an important part of the collection. This aspect of the collection was updated relatively recently with the acquisition of the Hayes textiles, a collection of gele (headscarves) manufactured by a British company solely for the Nigerian market in the post-colonial period.

Picton has written about studying African textiles that ‘the primary reason for an interest in textiles must, of course, be that they are there’ (Picton 1992: 16). This is no less true of the African textiles in the V&A, they are important both in their own right, as objects and because of where they are. It is equally necessary to study why and how the textiles have ended up in the museum. In order to do this it is necessary



to understand more about the workings and history of museums in general and the V&A in particular.<sup>2</sup>

### **The History of the V&A**

The first major attempt to write a history of the Victoria and Albert Museum was in 1980 when Anna Somers Cocks wrote *The Victoria and Albert Museum: the making of the collection* (Somers Cocks 1980). In it she argues that the V&A grew out of a spirit of free trade and radicalism that can be traced back to the 1832 reform bill and the rise of a new class of wealthy industrialists who firmly believed in the importance of technical innovation (it was, after all how they had made their money), while at the same time fearing the effects of mechanisation on quality (Somers Cocks 1980: 3). She describes the early years of the V&A under Henry Cole's directorship and argues that after his resignation in 1873 the museum started to lose its way. There followed a difficult period for the museum which culminated in 1897 when a select parliamentary committee was convened to investigate the museum (Somers Cocks 1980: 13). The committee made several recommendations: science should be separated from art and design and moved across the road to a new building on exhibition road, expertise and specialism should be encouraged, labels should be revised and catalogues written so the museum would be more accessible to the general public.

The publication of Somers Cocks' book which had focused on the development of the collection was followed two years later with an architectural history of the V&A's buildings by John Frederick Physick (1982). Since then there has been a

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<sup>2</sup> As my aim was to examine the institutional history of the V&A I have concentrated on written archival evidence rather than oral testimonials which could not have been obtained from everyone.

great deal of interest in the history of the V&A. This is partly explained by the expanding field of museum studies which grew rapidly during the 1990s (the effect of this will be discussed in the conclusion). However, it is also due to the museum's own extraordinary history and influence that the V&A has been of such great interest within museum studies. In particular, the unusual development of the V&A as a government department and its role as a model for museums across Europe, the USA, the British Empire and beyond have put the V&A at the centre of museum studies (Conforti 1997). Some of the topics that have been studied in relation to the V&A include the industrial arts (Trippi 1997), education, the conflict between scholarship and administration (Burton 1985), the role of loans in the museum collection (Eatwell 2000) and most usefully for understanding the African textiles in the museum the V&A in relation to imperialism (Barringer 1998) and the Asian collections (Clunas and Mittar 1997).

Writers and researchers have continued to focus on specific aspects of the museum's collection and history but it was not until Antony Burton wrote *Vision and Accident: the Story of the Victoria and Albert Museum* in 1999 that a complete history was attempted. In a recent talk at the V&A, Burton argued that there should be two aims to any institutional history. The first was not to be blinkered and the second was to look beneath the surface. He argued that there were three possible approaches to an institution's history, all of which are covered in *Vision and Accident* (1999). Firstly by looking at the "great men" who shaped the institution, the second is to study the organisational structures and the third is to look at the ideologies that shaped the institution. All three of these aspects are important for understanding the African textiles in the V&A.

The V&A was not named the Victoria and Albert Museum until 1899 when work on the current buildings began. Throughout this research the V&A and its predecessor institutions, Marlborough House Museum and the South Kensington Museum will be referred to as the V&A. The official founding of the V&A's predecessor institutions can be traced back to 1852. At this time the collections from the School of Design and Ornamental Art were moved from the basement of Somerset house to Marlborough House Museum under the direction of Henry Cole (Baker, 1997: 17) and the Somerset House collections were augmented by purchases from the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations which had been held the previous year. Historians of the V&A have argued about whether the founding of the museum should be traced back to the Great Exhibition of 1851 or the founding of the School of Design and Ornamental Art in 1837.

Among others Somers Cocks (1980) Frayling (1987: 17) and Physick (1982: 52) have traced the beginnings of the museum to the founding of the School of Ornamental Art and Design in 1837 which was based in Somerset House. The Royal Academy was responsible for the teaching at this new school, but from the beginning was concerned that instruction in the ornamental arts ran counter to their interest in fine or 'Higher Arts' (Frayling 1987: 17). Writers such as Heartney (2004:247) and Trippi (1997: 79) have argued that the true origins of the museum are to be found in the Great Exhibition which opened to the public in May 1851. The 'rival accounts of its [the V&A] own genesis' continue to be debated to the present day (Barringer 1998: 358). This argument is not merely about a date but about the ideology of the museum.

Writers that date the beginning of the V&A back to the founding of the School of Design and Ornamental Art emphasise the museum's role as an educational institution. This educational role was closely tied to Britain's commercial development; it was necessary to educate people in good design 'so that Britain would thereby be better equipped to outdistance her international rivals' (Cardoso Denis 1997). This competition with other countries was also a motivation for the Great Exhibition which seems to have involved a curious mixture of confidence that Britain could take on any rivals (Pike 1967: 22) and concern about the poor quality of British design, particularly in relation to the east (Robinson 2004). However, what most comes out of identifying the museum's origins in the Great Exhibition is the museum's links to Empire. The Great Exhibition was an opportunity to show off current and potential imperial possessions to benefit 'both business and national pride...and serve well as propaganda in an international environment' (Trippi 1997: 80). For a study of the African textiles it is these origins that have the most relevance. The only manufactured items from Africa to be bought from the Great Exhibition for the V&A collection were 13 Tunisian textiles, some of which remain in the museum collection.

Charles Saumarez-Smith has argued that the museum's imperial links were important in efforts to establish a British national identity: 'Nationally, economically and industrially self confident, Britain fervently desired to encompass within its reach the full spectrum of world cultures' (Saumarez-Smith 1997: 275). He argues that the museum reveals 'a wish to document and describe the specific characteristics of the British contribution to the cultures of the world and a desire to establish the legitimacy of British art and Design alongside British pre-eminence in industry and imperial conquest' (Saumarez-Smith, 1997).

Particularly useful both in terms of a theoretical framework for looking at the African textiles in the V&A and also for methodology have been studies of the Asian collections in the V&A. Mittar and Clunas have examined the Asian collections in the V&A and explain further the relationship between museums and empire.

Recent studies of the role of museums in the nineteenth and twentieth century British culture have addressed these institutions as complicit in sustaining British rule in Asia and elsewhere. Their activities of collecting and cataloguing have been viewed as analogous to the acquisition of territory and the classifying of populations necessary to maintain British supremacy in a political and economic sense ... A national institution such as the Victoria and Albert Museum was an important adjunct of the empire, classifying and displaying the art of non-European nations in an assertion of political control over them. (Clunas and Mittar 1997: 230)

However, Sub-Saharan Africa was implicitly excluded from the 1930s onwards. If collecting is a way of asserting control what does the lack of a collection imply? It is also necessary to understand why if Africa was excluded, why certain textiles have ended up in the museum despite this and what the implications of this are.

Clunas has suggested one reason to explain why the V&A excluded African artefacts.

The very differential practices of racism in nineteenth century Britain also need to be borne in mind, especially to explain the absence of African art from the collections at South Kensington. Although included in Owen Jones's 'The Grammar of Ornament' African art was implicitly categorised, even more consistently than the Indian works as 'ethnography' rather than 'art' and as such was collected far more extensively by the British Museum than by the V&A. (Clunas 1997: 230)

Only North Africa was included in The Grammar of Ornament. The division between art and ethnography and its link to racial theories of the nineteenth century

is central to understanding the V&A's attitude to Africa. Questions of art and ethnography were particularly important at the V&A because it complicated a question the V&A often found itself grappling with: the division between fine and ornamental art (Burton 1999: 100). However, it is not until well into the twentieth century that these definitions become fixed; before 1920 the V&A seems willing to collect sub-Saharan material as and when the opportunity arises.

The terms North and Sub-Saharan Africa are problematic, especially given that many of the countries in what is referred to as 'Sub-Saharan' Africa are not entirely south of the Sahara. The term North Africa and the Maghrib are used to refer to Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria and Libya because this is the division that has been used by many museum collections, the V&A included.

### **Chapter Summary**

The PhD is divided into three sections. The first covers the time of the museum's founding in 1852 until 1897. The first chapter deals with the founding of the museum in 1852 and the first African textiles acquired by the museum which were bought directly from the Great Exhibition. The second chapter explores the story of the acquisition of examples of Ethiopian dress following the battle of Meqdala. The third chapter deals with the interest in textiles from Egypt and other parts of North Africa during the late Nineteenth century.

The second section covers the period from 1897, when a department specifically devoted to textiles was first opened until the start of the Second World War. This period coincides with the development of formal empire in Africa. The fourth chapter covers the development of the North African collections under A.J.Kendrick, the museum's first Keeper of Textiles. The fifth chapter covers the collection of

textiles from Sub-Saharan Africa during the same period. Chapter 6 covers the period 1924-1939 and deals with the collection of Moroccan textiles and the disposal of sub-Saharan African textiles.

The final section covers the post-war period until 2000. During this period it is the Circulation Department that is most active in the collection of African textiles.

Chapter 7 deals with the museum's interest in textiles produced for the West African market in Britain. Chapter 8 covers the Circulation Department's collection of African textiles. Chapter 9 will explore the disposal of more African textiles during the 1990s and the acquisition of the Hayes headties in 2000.

By studying in detail the acquisitions, disposals and used of African textiles by the V&A this research seeks to assess the institution's changing attitude towards Africa. Key to this is the division between North and Sub-Saharan Africa and 'art' and 'ethnography'. The conclusion will also look at recent changes in the V&A, which since 2000 has been reassessing its collection of African objects and future collecting of African art and design.

## **Chapter 1: Africa at the Great Exhibition.**

In 1852 the Museum of Manufactures was founded. This museum was the direct predecessor of the V&A today. In the same year a set of Tunisian textiles were purchased by this museum, some of which remain in the V&A collection today. These textiles were the first objects from Africa acquired by the Museum and looking at the circumstances around their accession into the museum we can understand something about the museum's attitude towards objects from Africa.

### **Origins of the V&A**

In 1852 a Department of Practical Art was founded as part of the Board of Trade, it was based at Marlborough House, London and included the Museum of Manufactures and the Metropolitan School of Design. Its superintendent was Henry Cole and the project was championed by Prince Albert. This institution, which was then known as The Marlborough House Museum, became the South Kensington Museum and eventually the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A). The museum came about because Cole and Prince Albert were concerned about the low standard of design in British manufacturing and wanted to set out the inseparability of art and manufacture and to make the theory and practice of art understandable to all.

It was in 1852 that two important, but very different aspects of the museum came together. First, there was a collection of plaster casts from the School of Design in Ornamental Art and secondly a number of items that had been purchased from The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations (Great Exhibition)



in 1851. These objects were bought with a government grant given for the express purpose of building a museum collection.

Writers such as, Anna Somers Cocks (1980), Christopher Frayling (1987: 17) and John Frederick Physick (1982: 52) have traced the origins of the Victoria and Albert Museum to the founding of the School of Ornamental Art and Design in 1837 which was based in Somerset House, London. By highlighting the role of the School of Design in Ornamental Art they emphasise the museum's role as an educational institution, in particular with regard to ensuring a good standard of design education amongst Britain's manufacturers. Others, Eleanor Heartney (2004:247) and Peter Trippi (1997: 79) for example, have argued that the true origins of the V&A are to be found in the Great Exhibition, which opened to the public in May 1851. What comes out of identifying the museum's origins in the Great Exhibition are its links to Empire. It was an opportunity for Britain to assert her position in the world and reflected her ties to other parts of the globe. The Great Exhibition was an opportunity to show off current and potential imperial possessions to benefit 'both business and national pride ... and serve well as propaganda in an international environment' (Trippi 1997:80). The V&A's links to Empire have had a long-lasting impact on the formation, display and interpretation of its collections which can be read as reflecting a British imperial worldview. In this view, British cultural products, norms and typologies are at the centre and 'others' are permitted limited representation (rarely participation) at its margins. Africa, in contrast to other parts of the world, was not usually allowed even representation. When it comes to considering the African textiles in the V&A, the Great Exhibition is the most important

component of the museum's foundation because it was the same imperial worldview that was expressed by the Great Exhibition that would go on to decide what was to be collected and what should be excluded.

### **The Founding of the School of Ornamental Design**

Somers Cocks (1983) has argued that the origins of the V&A can be traced back to the founding of the School of Ornamental Design in 1837 which itself represented a radical utilitarian approach to design education. She traces this approach back to the 1832 Reform Act and a rise in free trade (Somers-Cocks 1983:3). The Act is more properly known as the 'Representation of the People Act' and it reformed the British electoral system. The size of the electorate was increased by between 50% and 80% and meant that about one fifth of adult males in Britain had the right to vote for the first time. Notably the 1832 Act took away seats in the House of Commons from so called 'rotten boroughs' (boroughs with very small populations) and granted seats to the new cities that had sprung up as a result of the Industrial Revolution. Industrial success and the rise of free trade in Britain created a new class of wealthy and powerful industrialists who embraced technological innovation but feared the effects of mechanisation on standards. After the 1832 Reform Act these men had greater political influence and power and the ongoing success of British industry was of paramount importance to them.

In the early decades of the nineteenth century 'Art' remained the preserve of the elite. There was only 'weak and patchy support' for public art museums and access by the working classes (Burton 1999: 12). During the 1830s and as a result of the political changes brought about by the 1832 Reform Bill there was

increasing concern about declining standards in manufacturing and anxiety about competition from a rapidly industrialising Europe. This led to the government giving serious consideration to the relationship between art, design and manufacturing. In 1835 the Select Committee of Arts and Manufactures was set up to enquire into declining standards. The committee reported that ‘To us, a peculiarly manufacturing nation, the connection between art and manufactures is most important – and for this merely economical reason (were there no higher motive), it equally imports us to encourage art in its loftier attributes.’ (Select Committee of Arts and Manufactures 1835 quoted in Somers Cocks 1980: 3). The committee recommended setting up art schools in order to teach good design as an aid to commercialism.

The School of Design in Ornamental Art was founded in 1837 as a direct result of these recommendations. It was based in Somerset House, London. The Royal Academy, which had transferred to the National Gallery, continued to be involved in the teaching at this new school but was concerned that the focus on ornamental art conflicted with its own teaching of ‘Higher Arts’ (Frayling 1987:16). ‘Hitherto painting and sculpture alone had been deemed worthy of serious national regard’ (Robinson 2004: 225) and the Royal Academy was protective of its status. This attitude led to a conflict between the study of practical design and mastering basic fine art techniques. Design students were displaying ‘a deficiency in that early elementary knowledge of Drawing requisite for making satisfactory progress in Ornamental Art’ (Physick 1982: 14). The Royal Academicians, however, strongly believed that ‘figure drawing’ should only be practiced by those studying the ‘Fine Arts’ and attending their own academy. It was decided that instead the students of the Design Schools should

copy from a collection of exemplars. The School of Ornamental Design was given a small budget to buy old and new specimens of manufacture. Frayling has written that by the 1840s the School had ‘a total of more than 800 casts of architectural ornament... “heaped together” stylistically, and pedestals provided for busts, vases and candelabra. The School was now being conducted within a museum which was expanding almost by the day’ (Frayling 1987: 23). From the 1840s onward the collection travelled around the country to seventeen other Schools of Design that were set up by the government as a result of the 1835 select committee. By 1849 the School of Ornamental Design was running out of space to store its collection. Henry Cole was given the job of finding a solution and in 1852 the School of Ornamental Design collections were transferred to Marlborough House. The commitment to touring the collection for educational purposes was also transferred to the Marlborough House Museum and remained an important function of the V&A until the 1970s.

### **The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations**

In his essay ‘Industrial Arts and the Exhibition Ideal’ Trippi argued that

The Victoria & Albert Museum is rooted in the extraordinary success of a single public event. Between May 1851, when it was opened in London by Queen Victoria, and October 1851, when it was closed by her consort Prince Albert, the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations attracted more than six million visitors, making it the most heavily attended event known to that date. (Trippi, 1997: 79)

The South Kensington Museum literally grew out of the ‘roots’ of the Great Exhibition. Profits from the exhibition bought the land the museum stands on today and parliament voted £5,000 to the museum to buy items from the

exhibition to form the basis of the collection. The Great Exhibition was very much an imperial venture, displaying the wealth and power of Britain. It acted as a 'shop window' onto what colonial possessions had to offer and was also instrumental in selling the idea of Empire to the tax-paying public as Paul Greenhalgh explains:

By 1849 when the Great Exhibition was in its planning phase, British life was already difficult to conceive of in the absence of overseas resources, the maintenance of these being at the core of foreign policy. On the domestic front, power groups within British society increasingly saw the need to educate the population on the merits of the empire and to encourage the idea of a 'Greater Britain' in terms of one which included imperial gains.  
(Greenhalgh 1988: 53)

The exhibition was staged in what became an iconic glass building in Hyde Park. The building was internally divided into two halves: one for the display of manufactures, technologies and raw materials of Britain and her 'colonies and dependencies'; the other for those of foreign countries. The introduction of a degree of free trade into world affairs meant that people from all over the world could be invited to come and show off the best of what they had to offer the rest of the world. Half the exhibitors came from overseas and Trippi has argued that the Great Exhibition represents 'the worlds first truly international cultural display' (Trippi 1997:80). Despite the concerns about the poor level of design in manufacturing, Britain seemed confident that they could match anything the rest of the world had to offer.

As well as her own manufacturing Britain was keen to show off her growing Empire to the rest of the world. The displays of Britain's colonies and dependencies were believed to be good for 'both business and national

pride...and serve well as propaganda.’ (Trippi 1997: 80). The space available to each exhibitor was predetermined and those places where Britain’s imperial ambitions were more developed were rewarded with more space. For example India had 30,000 sq ft while the West Indies had only 200. India’s pre-eminence was recreated by the early Museum collection, £2,000 of the initial grant was spent on foreign goods and of that £1,500 was spent on India. Britain did not have much in the way of formal colonies in Africa. At this time Britain’s interests in Africa were limited to the Cape Colony and several trading posts and enclaves on the West African coast, of which the Gold Coast was the most developed. Nonetheless a number of African countries were represented, both in the section for Britain and her dependencies and in the foreign section. African stands tended to be dominated by raw materials rather than things that had been made.

An explanation for the preponderance of raw materials over manufactured goods is offered by the Official Descriptive and Illustrative Catalogue, Part 4 Colonies – Foreign States in the section entitled ‘British Possessions in Africa: South Africa, Western Africa and the African Islands’.

The distinguishing feature of all the contributions to the Exhibition sent from the dependencies of Great Britain is the predominance of raw material and produce over manufactures and fine arts. There is much that is suggestive in this fact. The early development of the prosperity of a new country or colony is always necessarily more directly dependent on its natural products, than on the industrial arts. There is much to interest both the naturalist and the merchant in the objects exhibited.  
(Ellis 1851: 949)

The majority of African stands at the Great Exhibition can be seen as following a colonial model which emphasised a country or territory’s potential for economic

exploitation. African displays were predominantly organised by European traders and settlers in Africa interested in drumming up trade and investment. The South African section, in particular, was dominated by raw materials and was intended 'chiefly as illustratory of the raw materials furnished by the districts which it represents.' (Ellis 1851: 949)

The introduction to the section on 'Western Africa' in the official catalogue also reflects many of these themes. It points out that all the displays are contributed by British exhibitors but assures the visitor that 'This collection of articles is a very complete representation of native products and of the results of native industry.' and emphasises that the 'raw materials are very interesting' (Ellis 1851: 952). However, the introduction also makes special mention of textiles produced in Africa: 'The most interesting and extensive part of the collection consists in the textile productions of native industry, which are extremely varied, and exhibit much simple ingenuity and ornament.' (Ellis 1851: 952). Several of the exhibitors in the Western Africa section displayed textiles and dress, most notably Captain Henry Dundas Trotter. R.N. Trotter's stand focussed on articles from the region around Egga on the Niger River and was heavily dominated by locally produced textiles and dress items. What is interesting is not only the number of textiles but the wealth of information about these items shown in the Official Descriptive and Illustrative Catalogue (Ellis 1851: 952). Many of the entries reveal who would wear such items and the specific towns where particular items are made. For example, '10: Specimens of female dresses, made of country cloth: these are worn by the higher classes. They are manufactured at

Illoryn, Yoruba country, and at Moko, in the Haussa country.’ (Ellis 1851: 953)

Other entries contain details about how these things are made.

22 Specimens of fine and blue-gazed tobes [man’s robe], such as are worn by the higher class of natives. The tobe is glazed in the following manor:- After the cloth has been thoroughly dyed with indigo it is hung up until it is completely dry; it is then spread on a wooden roller, and rubbed by hand with the shell of a snail: this produces the gloss.  
(Ellis 1851: 953)

This detailed information is likely to have been supplied by Trotter. A note at the beginning of the ‘Official Catalogue’, which was a shorter version of the catalogue intended to be more usable for visitors to the exhibition (only 350 pages rather than over a thousand) explained how the catalogues had been put together:

The gathering of the materials of which the Catalogues of the Exhibition are composed, and their preparation for publication in a collected form, require a short notice. By a decision of the Executive Committee, each exhibitor was called upon to furnish a written account of the articles proposed to be exhibited, and to forward this description for the purpose of forming the Catalogue of the Exhibition.  
(Yapp 1851:7)

The ‘Foreign Section’ of the Great Exhibition had displays by Egypt, Algiers (as an adjunct to the French section) and Tunis. The Algiers display which followed the colonial model was also made up of mostly raw materials. The exhibition catalogue pointed out that the ‘natural resources were only beginning to be opened up... the mineral wealth of this country would seem to be considerable, and when thoroughly rendered available may prove a fertile source of prosperity.’ (Ellis 1851: 1259) The Algiers stand had been designed to encourage investment in the area and to provide a chance for France to boast, on an international stage, about her new possession. The display had been organised



by Mr Edmond Bouvy, Commissioner of Commercial Affairs for the colony, and delegate of the French Minister of War to the London Exhibition.

The Egyptian Stand had been organised by the Egyptian Government rather than a European government or traders. The display was made up of a mixture of both raw material and manufactured items. The textiles were once again singled out for comment in the Illustrative and Descriptive Catalogue. ‘The cottons, linens, and silks of the native looms are very beautiful, and, when exhibiting design and colour, faithfully indicate that arrangement technically called the “Oriental Style.”’ (Ellis 1851: 1408) Despite this, none of the Egyptian cloths were chosen for the collection of the Marlborough House Museum.

Objects were bought from the Great Exhibition for the Marlborough House Museum. They ‘were to be selected without reference to styles, but entirely for the excellence of their art and workmanship’ (Hudson 1987: 48). Both Egyptian and Arab design were covered in Owen Jones The Grammar of Ornament which was published in 1856 and laid out the ‘general principles in the arrangement of form and colour in architecture and the decorative arts’ (Jones 1856). Jones was a close friend of Henry Cole and like him a key figure in nineteenth century design reform. He advised on the selection of objects for the Marlborough House Museum but despite this and despite the museum’s later enthusiasm for Egyptian artefacts (particularly textiles of which it has approximately 3,000) nothing from the Egyptian stand at the Great Exhibition was accessioned by the museum. The explanation for this may lie in the fact that the Great Exhibition

stand focussed on contemporary production while the V&A's interest lay in older material (see Chapter 3).

## **Tunis**

The Tunis Stand at the Great Exhibition differed from the stands of British dependencies and Algiers. Although it contained some raw materials, its focus was much more on items that had been made. An explanation for this emphasis on manufactured objects can again be found in the official catalogue which explained that, 'This large collection of Tunisian productions has been sent by one exhibitor only, in the person of His Highness Mushir Basha, Bey of Tunis' (Ellis 1851). The Tunis stand was controlled by the leader of an independent government rather than colonial officials or businessman. Tunis was not there as a colonial subject or area of potential imperial exploitation but as a semi-independent country. Although Tunisia was part of the Ottoman Empire the Beys had virtual independence in running the territory. This impacted upon the sort of image it sought to present to the world.

It seems that the people responsible for the Tunis stand were concerned with conveying something of their way of life (Fig. 1.1). The stand was dominated by a large Bedouin tent covered with pelts, which Dickinson referred to as 'one of the most remarkable features.' (Dickinson 1851 1: pl.xx) Running along the sides are display cases showing hats and perfume bottles, jars, pots as well as textiles and items of clothing. This is supported by the information from the Descriptive and Illustrative Catalogue.

The arrangement of the space allotted to these productions is also interesting, and presents somewhat of a realisation of a series of

small Eastern shops, the counter and stalls being fitted, and the articles being grouped in such a manner as to convey this impression. (Ellis 1851: 1412)



Fig: 1.1 Joseph Nash, View of the Tunisian court at the Great Exhibition, print, chromolithograph in Dickinson 1 1851 1: pl.xx

The Tunis stand seems to have attracted a certain amount of attention and two pictures of the stand were included in a series of prints produced by Joseph Nash at Prince Albert's request and issued by Dickinson Brothers as a souvenir of the Great Exhibition.

In one of the images two Tunisian men are depicted talking to a small group of English people (Fig. 1.2). The man standing was described in the Dickinson publication as Sy Hamda Elmkadden who is listed in the illustrated catalogue as 'Pro-Comissary appointed for the occasion.' (Ellis 1851) The second man is

described by Dickinson Brothers as his assistant Saido Belais. They write that, ‘his picturesque costume, loud talk in Arabic and energetic gestures [attracted much attention] he appears in the accompanying view, squatting, as was his custom, on one of the counters’. (Dickinson, 1851 1: pl.xix).



Fig. 1.2: Joseph Nash, Tunis 2 print, colour lithograph, 1851, V&A: 19536:8

A significant amount of the Tunis display was given over to textiles and dress, the catalogue noted of this display that the ‘articles of apparel...constitute one of the most singular and attractive features of this group of objects.’ (Ellis 1851: 1412) The catalogue went on to note that ‘The specimens of rich embroidery, applied to human apparel and to the decoration of the caparisons of the horse,

with the light and elegant ornaments in velvet attached to them, are attractive objects and are presumed to be of considerable value' (Ellis 1851: 1412).

### **Textiles acquired by the V&A**

The only African manufactured objects from the Great Exhibition which were purchased for the Marlborough House Museum Collection in 1852 were seventeen textiles from Tunisia. Two were described in the central inventory as 'Cloak or Bernous' (762-1852, 763-1852), three saddle bags (1384-1852, 1385-1852, 1386-1852), two girdles (1388-1852, 1389- 1852), one belt (1387-1852), one turban (1390-1852), a handkerchief (836-1852), two 'wrappers' (837-1852, 838-1852) and five 'scarves' (761-1852, 808-1852, 809-1852, 829-1852, 830-1852).

Fourteen textiles remain in the V&A collection, one of the men's sashes (808-1862) was cut into three pieces at some point. The pieces have been renamed as a 'pair of sashes' which is inaccurate, as none of the sections are now long enough to function as a sash. The other five pieces have been officially 'written off'. When an object is 'written off' it means it has officially been removed from the collection. Most objects that are written off have been through a 'Board of Survey', a lengthy official process which decides certain objects are not suitable for the collection in some way (see Chapter 6 for a full discussion). Sometimes, an object is found to be missing it is deemed to be 'Not in Place (NIP)', once an object has been NIP for five years it can be officially written off. One of these five features on a list made in 1933 of 'Objects issued to Provincial Schools of Art, and not recovered.' (763-1852 RF1933/4654) This was not an uncommon

fate and was something of an occupational hazard for a museum committed to touring its objects to art schools and other institutions around the country. The other four were ‘passed for destruction’, probably as a result of irreversible deterioration in their condition over the years, although no paperwork pertaining to them remains in the V&A archive (1389-1852, 838-1852, 836-1852, 829-1852).

It is worth looking at some of these textiles in more detail. Many of the pieces acquired by the V&A were made of silk. Although silk had once been produced locally in Tunisia (the only place in North Africa to have done so), by the time these textiles were produced in the middle of the nineteenth century raw silk was being imported. (Spring and Hudson 1995:31) Silk weaving was done in urban areas and in Tunis there had been specialist silk weaving guilds since the twelfth century (Spring and Hudson 2002: 9). The silk would be cleaned, carded and spun by women. The silk would then have been dyed by specialist craftsmen. The weaving was done by men in the workshop of a *mu'allim*. The *mu'allim* would have been head of a workshop, employing a number of male workers and apprentices. The *mu'allim* would have overseen production and controlled the overall design of the textile. This was very much an urban form of textile production and most, if not all, of the textiles acquired by the V&A would have been produced in an urban setting. This was a pattern that would continue, the majority of North African textiles in the museum's collection were produced in the coastal towns and cities of the region.



The woven silk 809-1852 in the V&A collection is an example of Tunisian brocade weaving (Fig. 1.3). The pattern is made up of blue and white horizontal stripes. The white stripes are heavily decorated with patterns in a range of colours. The blue portions are more lightly decorated with occasional, evenly spaced motifs in yellow. Supplementary heddles have been used to produce these patterns. When it was acquired by the V&A in 1852 this piece was listed as a ‘Scarf,’ but this was later changed to ‘Sash’. Long sashes were worn by Tunisian men wrapped several times around their waist; the folds could function like pockets for small items he wished to carry.



Fig. 1.3 Tunisian woven silk, 143 cm by 54.5 cm., c.1850, V&A: 809-1852

One of the recurring motifs found on this textile 809-1852 is hands (Fig. 1.4). As Spring and Hudson explain this design is used to counteract the effects of the ‘evil eye’. The idea of the ‘evil eye’ is common across the Mediterranean; it denotes a fear of envy.

In North Africa one of the most widespread means of countering the immediate impact of the evil eye is by use of the number five (khamsa). Throughout the region, images of hands are painted above doorways and windows ... in an attempt to avert misfortune. By means of spreading out the fingers of the hand towards the suspected carrier of the evil eye, or by pronouncing a formula containing the word khamsa, it is believed that the bad luck, illness or death that could result from an envious glance will be avoided. Patterns on textiles often assume the shape of a hand, or designs with five elements are incorporated as a means of protecting the wearer of the cloth, or the objects covered by the cloth, from the feared malicious influence of the evil eye.  
(Spring and Hudson 1995:44)

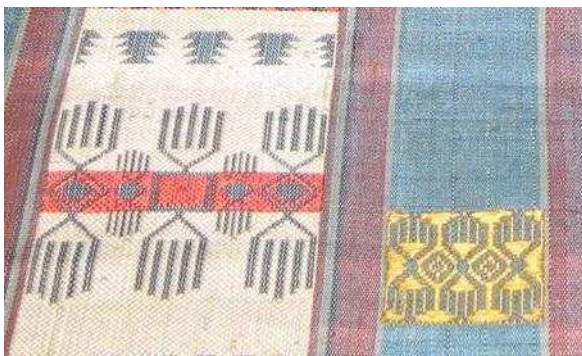


Fig. 1.4 Tunisian woven silk, detail showing khamsa, 143cm by 54.5 cm, c.1850, V&A: 809-1852

Another piece (830-1852) described as a scarf in 1852 is now described as a 'veil'. The veil is made of woven silk and is 268 cm long and 62.5 cm wide. In the centre of the veil is a plain black rectangle which is 58 cm by 36 cm. It is surrounded by wide borders of woven gold and coloured silk. There is a fringe 13 cm long at each end. The plain black square in the centre is woven from very fine silk so the women wearing it could see through it.

A second, similar 'scarf' to 809-1852 was also bought from the Great Exhibition and numbered 808-152. It features some of the same patterns but the background stripes are of red and blue (Fig. 1.5). When it arrived in the museum it was described being '8ft by 1ft 9 inches'. However, at some point it has been cut into



pieces; one is 28cm by 33 cm and another piece is 55cm by 45 cm, the third piece was on display in the V&A British Galleries and was not available for measuring (808, 808a-1862 and a third unlabelled piece). It is not clear from the records when it was cut or why. It was not uncommon for the V&A to cut textiles into pieces, sometimes keeping one in the museum and circulating the other to art colleges and (later) museums through the Circulation Department which continued the work started by the Marlborough House Museum. The V&A was interested in these pieces as examples of good design and technique rather than as demonstrations of Tunisian dress and these could be seen as clearly on a small piece as a complete object.



Fig. 1.5: Woven silk, Tunisian, 28cm by 33 cm, c.1850. V&A: 808a-1852.

808-1852 has been on display in the British Galleries of the V&A since 2003 in a section entitled “Objects from the Museum’s Early Collections” (Room 122G 2) along with other objects acquired from the Great Exhibition. The label

emphasises the importance of good design in the selection of objects for the early museum.

From about 1840 a collection of objects was formed for the Government School of Design. It was later expanded with objects purchased from the Great Exhibition. All had been selected for their appropriate use of materials, excellent workmanship or well-designed decoration. A new museum was established and rooms were provided for it at Marlborough House, London, where it was to be available to students, manufacturers and the general public to study.  
(V&A Label: Room 122G 2)

The display reflects the concern of the museums founders with the quality of British manufacturing and design and their desire to address these issues through education and examples of good design.

Several contrasting examples of Tunisian weaving were also represented in the textiles selected by the V&A. For example, 837-1852 is a tapestry-woven woollen blanket that is 249cm by 190.5 cm. It was initially described as a wrapper. It is decorated with elaborate and complex geometric patterns in black, blue, red, green, white and yellow. The pattern on the wool contains parallel lines of different widths, some containing images and others plain. Though some of the images on the lines may be repeated once, the rest of the pattern is not identical. A note in the register recorded that on the 20<sup>th</sup> of August 1902 it was 'sent to Messrs. J. P. Pallar and Sons dye-works, Perth, to be cleaned'. (V&A Central Inventory 837-1852).



Fig. 1.6 Tapestry woven wool blanket, Tunisia, c.1850, 249cm by 190.5 cm.  
V&A: 837-1852

### Summary

From the V&A's earliest days it was interested in collecting textiles from North Africa. This is shown by the acquisition of Tunisian textiles from the Great Exhibition. The museum's interest in the textiles of urban North Africa would continue. The V&A's links to the British Empire are also revealed by its early association with the Great Exhibition which was a spectacle designed to promote Britain's imperial position. As the century wore on and Britain became more involved in Africa, the collecting interests of the V&A would continue to reflect Britain's links with, and attitude towards, Africa.

## **Chapter 2: Clothing as War Booty, Ethiopian robes in the V&A**

The V&A's next significant acquisition of African textiles was from Ethiopia. They were acquired as a direct result of the Battle of Meqdala in 1868. As spoils of war they represent an important aspect of museum collections in the nineteenth century. These textiles are significant to the museum history because of the comments made about them by Henry Cole in 1870.

### **Introduction**

In *Vision and Accident: The Story of the Victoria and Albert Museum* Anthony Burton writes that: 'The example of the International Exhibitions, especially that of 1851, held up before the museum the possibility of worldwide coverage...Material from Africa, however, was never acquired even though, fleetingly, Henry Cole thought that it should be.' (Burton 1999: 254). Clearly the V&A has acquired some African material but what is significant about this quote is the support of Cole for the presence of African objects in the Museum collection. Burton is referring to a speech Henry Cole gave at a Missionary Exhibition in Manchester that was reported in the *Journal of the Society of the Arts*, 21 January 1870. Two years earlier the V&A had held its first exhibition devoted to material from Africa. In 1869 the V&A made its next significant acquisition of African textiles when the museum acquired twenty different textile items, along with significant amounts of Metalwork, from Ethiopia. This sudden flurry of activity about Africa is not coincidental. It has its origins in the Battle of Meqdala which took place in April 1868 and was the culmination of a British Military Expedition into Ethiopia, then called Abyssinia.

The majority of the textiles from Ethiopia that were acquired at this time were pieces of clothing, although there were also some saddlery items. Of these twenty pieces only four remain in the V&A collection, two kamis (woman's dress), a religious robe, and a shamma (shawl). In addition four Ethiopian robes which were in the V&A are now in the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge University (MAA). For an account of the transfer of these pieces see Chapter 6. At first the Ethiopian clothes in the V&A collection appeared to be something of an anomaly as there are very few East African textiles in the V&A collection. These Ethiopian clothes are not only fascinating in their own right they also represent an important aspect of nineteenth century museum collecting: the collection and display of military spoils.

### **The Battle of Meqdala**

In 1868 the V&A put on an exhibition entitled Abyssinian Objects from the Emperor Theodore. Lent by the Queen, the Admiralty and Others. (James 1997: 520) This was an exhibition of military spoils. The court of Abyssinian Emperor Tewodros II was looted following a battle in which he committed suicide in preference to surrendering to the British. In 1868 the British launched the Abyssinian Expedition led by a force of the Royal Indian Army commanded by Sir Robert Napier. The aim of the expedition was to free British diplomats, missionaries and other Europeans, including women and children, being held hostage by the Ethiopian King Tewodros II. Tewodros had hoped to receive assistance, in particular relating to the development of military technology, from Christian Europeans in his struggles with Egypt. Tewodros courted many European countries but seemed to have a particular affection for Britain and Queen Victoria,

probably due to his friendship with Walter Plowden. In 1847 Plowden had convinced Lord Palmerston to appoint him British Consul at Massawa (in present day Eritrea) with a view to increasing trade between Britain and Ethiopia (Arnold 1992: 23). Plowden had befriended Tewodros when he was a young rebel leader named Dejamatch Kasai and wrote to the British Government on 7 April 1855 to report on Kasai's recent military successes in the feudal wars of Ethiopia. 'Dejamatch Kasai has taken, since his coronation, the name and style of Theodorus, King of Ethiopia', there being an ancient prophecy that a king of his name should reform Abyssinia, restore the Christian faith and become a master of the world' (Arnold 1992: 42) Plowden went on to give a warning to the British Government that would prove to be remarkably prescient.

The King is capable of great things, good or evil. His fanatical zeal, his vehement character, and the pride engendered by his wonderful success – armies and strongholds defeated or taken almost by the terror of his name – render it hard to foresee how he will receive European advances; and our relations with Turkey and Egypt will complicate every difficulty.  
(Arnold 1992: 42)

In 1862, following Plowden's death, a man called Captain Cameron was sent to replace him and was given the title Consul in Abyssinia but instructed to take up residence in Massawa which was not part of Abyssinia. Although the first meeting between Cameron and Tewodros went well things quickly started to go wrong and the following year Cameron was taken prisoner. The catalyst for Tewodros taking Cameron prisoner was twofold. Firstly, Tewodros was offended when a letter he sent to Queen Victoria through Cameron was left unanswered. Secondly, he started to mistrust Cameron whom he suspected was negotiating with his enemy, the Egyptians. The Emperor Tewodros had written to Queen Victoria as a fellow leader of a Christian nation, he wanted to send an

embassy to Britain and asked that the British ‘may arrange for the safe passage of my Ambassadors everywhere on the road.’ (Percy 1992: 65).

As time went on it became clear that Tewodros wanted British help in his disputes with Ottoman Egypt over territory in Northern Ethiopia. He felt that as Christian nations they should stand together against Muslim nations. In particular, he wanted Britain to supply him with fire arms and artisans who could teach him how to manufacture his own weapons. At this time Tewodros was under increasing pressure internally as well as externally. He was losing control of the country he had previously united. By 1867 his army was disintegrating as more and more of his soldiers deserted. The army which had once had 60,000 men had dwindled to only 10,000 and towards the end of 1867

Tewodros had been forced to abandon his capital at Dabra Tabor which he burned to the ground. (Zewde 1993) He arrived in Meqdela on 27 March 1868 as it had taken him six months to make the journey which was usually only a matter of days from Dabra Tabor to Meqdala because he was constructing roads for his heavy mortars as he went.

(Rubenson 1966). Behru Zewde has argued that Tewodros had lost his power before the British arrived in Ethiopia because so many of the Emperor’s supporters had deserted him and his enemies worked to help the British troops. This is borne out by the fact that the British troops were not attacked on the long march to Meqdala where the only enemy they had to contend with was the Ethiopian landscape. William Simpson who travelled with the expedition for the Illustrated London News commented in his diary that ‘If the inhabitants of it [Abyssinia] had been against us the Expedition must have had to stop at once. (Pankhurst ed. 2002: 105)

It is important to note that this expedition was not motivated by a desire to acquire territory. Bahru Zewde has pointed out that the Battle of Meqdala predates colonial interest in the region by twenty or so years and characterised the expedition as pre-colonial, in other words that it occurred in a place and time where Britain did not feel she had yet established vital interests worthy of defending by continued political and military presence (Zewde 1993). The British had tried to avoid a military expedition to Ethiopia but attempts to negotiate with Tewodros had failed. In 1866 Hormuzd Rassam, the British Consul in Aden was sent to Ethiopia with a message from Queen Victoria in an attempt to resolve the situation peacefully. At first it seemed he would succeed and the hostages would be freed but Tewodros changed his mind and took Rassam captive too. Some of the objects that would later end up in the V&A collection were received by Rassam as diplomatic gifts from both the Abuna (head of the Ethiopian church) and Tewodros himself. The ongoing situation with the hostages was becoming embarrassing to the British Government and they felt something had to be done.

In August 1867 the British Government decided they would have to use force (Marsden 2008). Although the aim of the Meqdala expedition was not to acquire territory in Abyssinia it can still be seen as part of an imperial culture. Ryan points out that:

[I]mperialism involved not only territorial acquisition, political ambition and economic interests but also cultural formations, attitudes, beliefs and practices. In particular ...imperialism [can be seen] as a pervasive and persistent set of cultural attitudes towards the rest of the world informed by varying degrees by militarism, patriotism, a belief in racial superiority and loyalty to a 'civilising mission.'  
(Ryan 1997: 12)



Seen like this the battle of Meqdala was both the result of imperial culture and also helped to create it by way it was presented to the public through photographs and exhibitions of the kind the V&A was involved in. Certainly the display of plundered objects became an important way in which the Government sought to gain tax-paying support for their imperial plans. For example, the battle of Kumasi in 1874 when the British attacked the capital of the Asante in present day Ghana. Similarly to the battle of Meqdala, there was looting by the British, a display in the V&A and the inclusion of objects taken during battle in the museum collection.

The British government decided to launch the ‘Abyssinian expedition’ from India under the Royal Indian Army and Sir Richard Napier was put in charge. Ethiopia was a dangerous and inhospitable place. Malaria and other diseases were a problem for Europeans in the low lands while the hilly hinterland was difficult terrain and largely unexplored and unmapped by Europeans. Napier was determined that after the muddle of the Crimean war that the expedition should be a success and no expense was spared in the preparations (Marsden 2008: 228). The expedition was very costly and Parliament had to add a penny to income tax to pay for it, when the cost rose again it was dubbed ‘the two-penny’ war. The estimated cost of £2 million ended up closer to £4 million as Napier transported 64,000 people and 55,000 animals to Ethiopia for the campaign (Bates 1979: 212). In fact, such was the need for mules that Roger Acton who travelled with the army to report for the Illustrated London News wrote that:

Officers and veterinary surgeons were sent to the countries of the Mediterranean, Turkey, Italy and Spain, under the direction of Colonel Clark Kennedy, to purchase thousands of mules, while the Indian government bought up more in Asia. The consent of the Sultan and Viceroy of Egypt was

obtained as well to the collection of the mules at Suez as to the landing of the expedition on the Red Sea Coast.  
(Acton 1868: 30)

Ten ships were specially fitted out to transport the mules across the sea to Egypt (Marsden 2007: 230). The British press had already had their interest in the situation in Ethiopia piqued and they lapped up details of Napier's grand plans. Punch wrote, in reference to the plea for mules that 'If the expedition should run short of mules there will always be an abundance of asses in the chief military departments at home, which may be freely drawn upon' (Quoted in Marsden 2007: 231). However, mules were necessary in the Ethiopian highlands and the death rate among them was high so Napier was probably right to insist on so many (Simpson 2002: 105).

Tewodros only reached Meqdala two weeks before the British did because it had taken him so long to travel from Debre Tabor (Zewde 1993). The battle took place on Friday 10 April 1868 on the plain of Aroge below Meqdala. About 4,000 Ethiopians took part in the battle and around 700-800 of them were killed. Only 2,000 men from the 32,000 strong British expedition actually took part in any fighting, about twenty of them were wounded and two of these died later. Over the following two days Tewodros released his European prisoners (Rubenson 1966). On 13 April the fortress of Meqdala was stormed by the British and Tewodros shot himself just before their arrival with a gun that had been a present from Queen Victoria.

### **Queen Woyzaro Terunesh and Prince Alemayou**

Of the eight items (four in the V&A and four in the MAA) that are still available the two kamis (a woman's cotton dress), the shamma (a cotton shawl) and two ceremonial robes came in to the V&A from the Secretary of State for India and were recorded as 'belonging formerly to the Queen of Abyssinia.' This is a reference to Queen Woyzaro Terunesh, Tewodros's second wife. Following the death of his first wife Tewodros married the daughter of one of his enemies in Ethiopia. On 5 February 1855 Tewodros won a decisive battle against his rival Dejazmatch Wubie and two days later declared himself Emperor of Ethiopia. He married Wubie's daughter Terunesh for tactical reasons. Percy Arnold writes of the marriage 'Whereas Ali's daughter [Tewodros first wife] had loved and assisted Theodore, Wubie's despised him as an upstart, and, although she bore him an heir for whom Theodore showed great affection, the royal spouses had little time for one another' (Arnold 1992: 231).

After Emperor Tewodros died and Meqdala had been ransacked by the British forces they had to decide what to do with his Terunesh and their son Prince Alemayou. William Simpson wrote in his diary on 28 April that

Theodore's queen, who was ill [he had noted her poor health some days previously on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of April] with a bad cold from the bitter winds of the Plateau of Wadela, is again better, and is now expressing a wish to accompany her son to India, where he is to be sent as the best place suitable for his education.  
(Pankhurst ed. 2002:97)

This plan to educate Prince Alemayou in India seems to have originated with the British. Richard Pankhurst quotes the following from papers held in the Houses of Parliament (Further Papers, 9)

Immediately after her [Queen Woyzaro Terunesh] husband's death Robert Napier had written to her on 14 April, about her son, and his future, saying, "It is to be feared that, in the present state of Abyssinia, the youth's life will be in danger at the hands of many persons who will aspire to the empire of Abyssinia. We are willing to take the child under our protection, and send him to England or Bombay to be educated, and we would suggest this arrangement to you as the best that could be made. Your own wishes regarding his disposal shall, however, be followed by us." (Pankhurst ed. 2002: 97-98)

William Simpson reported that the Queen had agreed to Napier's proposal in the Illustrated London News on 27 June 1868.

Captain Speedy was assigned to escort the Queen. He had joined the Meqdala expedition as a member of the intelligence corps and was considered an expert on Ethiopia due to time spent there previously. In 1862 while visiting Ethiopia he had been befriended by Tewodros who nicknamed him Basha Felika, meaning 'speedy' or 'lightning.' Speedy, in turn had described the Ethiopian Emperor as 'a man of great ability, brave, generous, and true to his word, with a strange mixture of inordinate pride – and deep humility, extreme gentleness and extreme ferocity.' (Simpson 2002: 23) Unfortunately the Queen died soon after the battle and her son, Prince Alemeyahu, was entrusted into Captain Speedy's care and brought to Britain where he lived until his death in 1879.

Acton described the death of Queen Terunesh in the Illustrated London News

When the head-quarters' camp reached Aikhullet, on May 15, this poor lady died...Her funeral took place next morning in the great church at Chelicut, three miles distant from our camp. The women of her household, showing her robe, her ornaments, her slippers and her drinking cup, beat their breasts, tore their hair, and scratched their cheeks, shedding tears of real grief as they bewailed her death in a sorrowful chant prolonged for two hours. (Acton 1868: 76)

On 20 February a message was sent to the Secretary of State for India in London.

My Lord, I have the honour to inform your lordship that I propose handing over to the ... Euphrates expected here on about the 24<sup>th</sup> just one case containing the dress and ornaments of H.H. the late Queen of Abyssinia for transmission to your lordship.

Set of articles of the deceased Queen of Abyssinia

1 royal robe with silver ornament, 1 Red silk cloak, 1 silk cloak, 1 pair silk pyjamas, 2 worked cotton and silk (mixed) robes, 1 cotton sheet (silk border), 1 pair slippers silver, 1 pair bracelets silver, 2 small metal chains, 6 rings gold or brass, 6 rings silver or lead, 1 bundle of small rings, 1 chain with 2 copper rings attached, 1 silver pin, 1 bundle of small bells on copper wire, 1 silver neck ornament chain, 2 charm necklace amber leather and silver, 1 silver neck ornament chain, 1 pair bracelets silver, 1 pair bracelets silver.

(IOR/20/AIA/503 No. 9/332 Political Deptt./ H.Hx's Principal Secretary of State for India, India Office, London/ Aden 20 Feb 1869.)

On 18 March it was confirmed that the Queen's possessions had been sent from Aden to the Secretary of State for India in England. All of these items ended up in the V&A. The three pieces that remain in the collection are listed as '2 worked cotton and silk (mixed) robes' (399-1869 and 400-1869) and '1 cotton sheet (silk border) (401-1869)'. The majority of the other pieces were removed from the collection in the 1930s. Of these, it has been possible to locate two ceremonial robes (listed as 1 Royal robe with silver ornament and 1 silk cloak) in the Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology in Cambridge (MAA) (see Chapter 6).

Prince Alemayou became something of a celebrity in Britain and the V&A collection contains several photographs of him. Two were taken at Osborne House, Queen Victoria's home on the Isle of Wight where she spent summers with her family (E.1457-2000 and 24-1939). Captain Speedy, who continued to look after Prince Alemayou when they arrived in England also lived on the Isle of Wight and Prince Alemayou met Queen

Victoria who apparently took a personal interest in him. Two of the photographs were given to the museum in 1939 by Miss Perrin, a descendent of Speedy. Three years previously Mrs Henry Perrin (also a descendent of Speedy) gave the V&A a collection of metalwork (M.440 to 445-1936). The credit note in the central inventory reads '[these] objects formed part of the collection of the late Captain Speedy, guardian of Prince Amaru [sic].' Unfortunately, to date, no photographs have been found of Alamayou's mother Queen Terunesh.

There are a second set of relevant photographs in the V&A. The Meqdala expedition was one of Britain's earliest military operations to be captured via the relatively new technology of photography. The military campaign was heavily photographed by the Royal Corps of Engineers using two sets of photographic stores and equipment. Members of the Royal Corps of Engineer were taught photography at the South Kensington Museum by Charles Thurston Thomson (Ryan 1997: 79). Some of these photographs are now in the collection. The V&A's involvement in training photographers shows how instrumental the museum was in creating the imperial image. Ryan has written about the role of photography in the Meqdala campaign and pointed out that people were largely absent from the photos.

Although a few photographs were made of notable individuals...the indigenous peoples of Abyssinia are virtually absent from the photographic record...The photographs of Abyssinia focus largely on the British forces on the one hand and an empty Abysinian geography on the other ... The Abyssinia Campaign was thus collectively presented as a war waged against nature.  
(Ryan 1997: 92)

### **The Queen's Clothes**

The V&A has in its collection two kamis and a shamma that belonged to Queen Terunesh. A kamis is a form of dress for Ethiopian women which was popular in the mid-nineteenth century.

The first kamis (399-1869) is 141 cm long (Fig. 2.1). It is made up of two layers of cotton sewn together. The dress is constructed from factory made cotton of a standard 73 cm width. In order to make the garment wide enough there is a seam running down the garment to the left of the neckline and also on the back. The two kamis in the V&A are both made from two layers of soft cotton probably produced in Manchester and are heavily decorated with embroidery around the neckline and on the cuffs. In the middle of the nineteenth century Manchester calico was preferred to locally produced cotton in Ethiopia. This was due to the fact that the machine manufactured cottons had a very even weave which provided a better base for detailed embroidery (Spring and Hudson 1995: 125). The bottom is unhemmed. It is shorter at the front than at the back. The wrist openings have a 14cm circumference and the neck opening which is fastened with a single blue button has a 27 cm circumference (Fig. 2.2). The woman who wore this was small and slender.



Fig. 2.1: Queen Terunesh's kamis, Cotton embroidered with silk, Ethiopia, Mid-nineteenth century. V&A: 399-1869

The kamis is decorated with embroidery on the front and the back (Fig. 2.2). The embroidery is worked in silk which is not produced in Ethiopia. Silk thread for embroidery could be obtained by unravelling imported silk cloth. Some raw silk was bought from China and then spun and dyed locally (Spring and Hudson 1995: 123, 128).

The embroidery was described as follows in the embroidery section of *World Dress*:

*Fashion in Detail* a V&A publication featuring highlights from the collection:

[The kamis is] made from two layers of soft cotton extensively decorated with a series of embroidered bands covering the shoulders and chest and appearing to hang around the neck like a massive piece of jewellery. Only four colours are used and with such a limited palette pattern and texture are very important. The solid, flat bands of chevrons separate these chain-like patterns in which the ground fabric has been manipulated to form small bumps. The easiest way to achieve this effect is to pinch a small area of the cloth, wrap thread around the raised part and then outline the rows of bumps with embroidery.

(Crill, Weardon and Wilson: 2009:36)

We see from this the V&A's focus on, and interest in technique even when the piece falls outside its geographical remit.





Fig. 2.2: Queen Terunesh's kamis, neck detail. Cotton embroidered with silk, Ethiopia, mid-nineteenth century. V&A: 399-1869

At the base of the neck decoration and on the back are embroidered crosses reflecting Ethiopia's Christian culture (Fig.2.3).



Fig. 2.3: Queen Terunesh's kamis, back. Cotton embroidered with silk, Ethiopia, mid-nineteenth century. V&A: 399-1869

The second kamis (400-1869) is similar in construction to the first but the embroidery on

it, though still centred around the neck, is different and covers a greater proportion of the garment overall (Fig. 2.4). The colours used are red, yellow, black and green and chain stitch has mainly been used. Similarly the pattern is arranged in bands around the neck but the bands are wider and more elaborate and are surrounded by a less densely embroidered floral pattern. The embroidery reaches to the bottom of the garment. The pattern continues onto the back (Fig. 2.5).



Fig. 2.4: Queen Terunesh's kamis, front, cotton embroidered with silk, Ethiopia mid-nineteenth century. V&A: 400-1869

The difference in embroidery design is interesting. During the nineteenth century Ethiopia was a strictly hierarchical society. Clothes denoted rank and status and were judged on pattern, colour and fineness of weave. The extensive decoration on both the kamis would denote status. Both the embroidery and the cut of a kamis can reflect regional variations but it has not been possible to identify whether these patterns reflect specific areas.



Fig. 2.5: Queen Terunesh's kamis, back, cotton embroidered with silk, Ethiopia mid-nineteenth century. V&A: 400-1869

The third piece of clothing that was said to belong to the queen and is still in the V&A collection is a shamma (401-1869), a wraparound shawl worn by both men and women in Ethiopia. The shamma in the V&A is 205.7 cm long and 274 cm wide and is made up of two thicknesses of soft cotton sewn together. Unlike the kamis this cotton appears to have been hand woven. There are three main types of shamma the natala, the kutta and the buluko (Spring and Hudson 1995: 122) 401-1869 is an example of a natala, the lightest form of shamma and one worn by women with a kamis. The natala is decorated with a band of coloured stripes, predominantly red and this is known as a tibeb. Towards the end of the nineteenth century the tibeb became more elaborate with greater variety in pattern and colours. However in the mid-nineteenth century it was unusual to have any pattern on a shamma and the fact that it did reflected the Queen's high status: 'In the mid-nineteenth century only a very few were permitted to wear ... a type of shamma that

boasted a decorative band (tibebe) with supplementary weft patterns in red, yellow and blue silk' (Spring and Hudson 2002:13).

The shamma communicates information about its wearer, not only through how it is made and decorated but also through how it is worn. The shamma can be used to express the wearer's mood and personality as well as status relative to those around them. This use of the shamma is well documented in the twentieth century and is being studied in relation to the late nineteenth century by Isabela Orłowska, but as Spring and Hudson point out, 'This use of the shamma was noted by at least one commentator of the mid-nineteenth century' (Lefebvre 1845-8:1, 28 in Spring and Hudson 1995:124).

In addition to the three pieces in the V&A there are two further pieces of clothing that belonged to Queen Terunesh at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge, quite different to those described above. The first is a kabba (cloak) (MAA: Z19188, previously V&A: 396-1869) 153 cm long and approximately 105cm wide at the base (Fig. 2.6). The kabba is made of dark blue silk lined with red silk. It would form a roughly semicircular shape laid out flat but has been folded in to create a pointed hood. There is a neck band 10 cm across creating a neck opening 23cm long. A 34 cm tassel is attached to the point of the hood. The kabba is decorated around the opening with an 8 cm band of scallop shapes cut out of yellow, red and blue silk and appliquéd on. There are 33 cm long triangles of similar decoration at the base of the robe.





Fig. 2.6: Queen Terunesh's kabba, embroidered silk, Ethiopia, mid-nineteenth century. MAA: Z19188



Fig. 2.7: Blue silk kabba, Ethiopia, mid-nineteenth century. Detail showing neck fastening and decoration. MAA: Z19188

The second item of Queen Terunesh's clothing in the MAA is also a dark blue silk kabba lined with a contrasting silk, this time a floral pattern. It is of similar construction to the Z19184 and also has a scalloped border (Z19184, previously V&A: 395-1869). It is 147 cm long from the tip of its hood to its base. However, Z19184 is heavily decorated with pierced and beaten silver gilt bosses (Fig. 2.8). Something that appears to be a censer

hangs from the tip of the cloak, it is 6cm long and attached to a chain (Fig. 2.9). The chain has bugle shaped metal pieces hanging from it, which continue around the edge of the dress and would have fallen into the face if the hood of the kabba was up. These shapes are repeated in Queen Terunesh's jewellery which remain in the V&A. The fastening across the neck is a large, metal buckle attached to the cloth with three arms and decorated with filigree (Fig. 2.10). The level of work on the cloak obviously denotes high status and its weight alone would suggest it was only suitable for ceremonial use.



Fig. 2.8: Blue silk kabba with silver bosses, Ethiopia, mid-nineteenth century. MAA: Z19184



Fig. 2.9: Censer detail from kabba, Ethiopia, mid-nineteenth. MAA Z19184



Fig. 2.10: Clasp Blue silk kabba with silver bosses, Ethiopia, mid-nineteenth century

The bosses all depict pairs of animals around a tree. The largest one is in the centre of the back and has a 12cm diameter; it depicts two crocodiles (Fig. 2.11).



Fig. 2.11: Central boss depicting crocodiles and a tree, Ethiopia, mid-nineteenth century. MAA Z19184

The bosses were described as follows on V&A labels dating from 1888. ‘The ornaments on the bosses consist of pairs of sphinxes, and serpents, crocodiles and lions, vis-à-vis with a tress between them, an ancient Assyrian and later Byzantine ornamental device to be found in decorative work in all sorts of materials (Central Inventory 395-1869).



Clothes that have been worn are peculiarly intimate objects, revealing things about their wearers who leave traces on them. They reveal the queen's size. We can tell she wasn't very tall from the length of the garments and that she was small and slender from the tiny wrist and neck openings. Although all of her clothes were clearly high quality items when they were made, by the time they reached the museum they were all in poor condition. They reveal how difficult Queen Terunesh's life must have been as she travelled around Ethiopia with Tewodros II as he began to lose control of the territory he had previously unified. For example, the two kamis and the shamma are very dirty and the bottoms of the dresses are beginning to fray. Many of the silver bosses on MAA: Z19184 are damaged (Fig. 2.12), although this may have happened while the garments were in transit. The tassel on the plainer cloak has burrs caught in it (Fig. 2.13).



Fig. 2.12: Damaged boss from kabba, Ethiopia mid-nineteenth century. MAA: Z19184





Fig. 2.13: Tassel with burr from kabba, Ethiopia mid-nineteenth century. MAA: Z19188

There are two further similar kabbas, blue silk with metal bosses, in the MAA collection that were also transferred from the V&A. They are as heavily, decorated as the Queen's robe. The Museum für Volkerkunde in Vienna has a similar cloak acquired in 1905 which is described as having been worn by 'high ranking noblewomen on festive occasions' (Plankensteiner 2005:29). Spring and Hudson have written that:

During the nineteenth century a succession of enlightened rulers began to unify the Christian Empire of Ethiopia ... the complex hierarchy of religious, secular and military officialdom in this empire needed delineation. An impressive range of woven or embroidered silk costumes was created to define the status of the wearer.  
(Spring and Hudson 2002:12-13)

These cloaks may well have been part of that process.



Fig. 2.14: Blue silk kabba decorated with embroidery and metal work, Ethiopia mid-nineteenth century. MAA Z:18161



Fig. 2.15: Blue silk kabba decorated with embroidery and metal work, mid-nineteenth century, Ethiopia. MAA: Z19185

Unlike the Queen's robe the bosses on the back do not depict any animals (Fig. 2.16).

This cloak was sold to the V&A in 1869 for £8 by Colonel Edward Stanton. Colonel Stanton (later General Sir Edward Stanton, KCB, KCMG) was appointed agent and consul general to Egypt in May 1865 while negotiations with Tewodros II for the release of the British captives were ongoing. As Egyptian consul he was involved in these negotiations and probably received this robe as an acknowledgement for his role.



Fig. 2.16: Back detail of kabba, Ethiopia mid-nineteenth century. MAA: Z19185

### **The Abun's robe**

In 1870 another important piece of clothing from Ethiopia was acquired by the museum (1424-1870). It was described as the 'Sacred vestment of the Abouna or high priest of Abyssinia'. The Abun (usually spelt Abouna during the nineteenth century) was the title of the metropolitan bishop or head of the Coptic church in Ethiopia. A note signed by Sir M. D. Wyatt recommends it for purchase: '[v]ery picturesque and original with Christian emblems and elegant conventional ornament. It is, I think, quite an object for the Department to purchase at a reasonable price, say anything under twenty pounds.' (Central Inventory 1424-1870). The V&A actually paid only £10. A further note in the Accessions Register says it was 'Taken at Magdala'. It was purchased from an

R.D. Kempe. Unfortunately there are no further records relating to this transaction so it has not been possible to trace Kempe,

Ethiopia has an ancient tradition of Christianity as Spring and Hudson explain.

During the first millennium BC a powerful kingdom developed in Ethiopia with its capital at Aksum in the northern province of Tegré. Early in the fourth century AD this kingdom was converted to Christianity and remained the focus of religious, political and military power in Ethiopia until the eleventh century... In 1632 a permanent capital of the Christian empire ... was established at Gondar.  
(Spring and Hudson 1995:121)

However, the empire was dependent on the patronage paid to it by a multitude of local rulers and interest and it was not until Tewodros II's reign that any serious effort was made to centralise and unify the country.

The vestment is predominantly made of white satin silk. Spring and Hudson have explained the significance of silk in Ethiopia.

Silk has played an important part in the social and religious life of Ethiopia from the earliest days of the kingdom of Aksum, which was converted to Christianity in the fourth century. It was imported in large quantities from India, Arabia and China, and stored in vast caverns in the central highlands of Ethiopia ... From these storehouses Ethiopian emperors would make prodigious gifts of silk to other churches in Christendom.  
(Spring and Hudson 2002:12)

They go on to explain that churches were heavily adorned with silk hangings, so it is unsurprising that the robe of the Abun should be made of silk too. While we have only the word of the unknown Kempe to go on that this was worn by the Abun, given the richness of the garment and the religious imagery on it, it seems likely, that it belonged to

the head of the church. The head of the church in Ethiopia at the time of the battle of Meqdala was Abuna Salama, who had earlier crowned Tewodros II emperor (Percy 1991).

The vestment is sleeveless and has a large triangular hood, made of linen. The back has a square of red silk attached. This and the hood are heavily embroidered with gold and coloured threads. It is 177 cm long and 171 cm wide. The hood (Fig. 2.17) is decorated with two angels and a series of crosses similar in design to Ethiopian processional crosses. There are also inscriptions along all three sides in Arabic. Along the two sides it reads ‘O God your priests ... justice and your good people are always joyful’ And ‘When you pray, may God hear you. May invoking the name of the God of Justice give you victory. Amen, Hallelujah.’ The third inscription along the bottom reads ‘Emmanuel, in the name of the Father, by the Patriarch Father Markos, May God give him long life. This year 1464.’<sup>1</sup> The date has been given according to the Coptic calendar; the Coptic year 1464 ran from 30 September 1747 until 28 September 1748 so we can date the making of this robe precisely. There is in the British Museum and the Royal Ontario Museum in Canada tablet woven hangings for the interior of churches that are believed to have been woven in Gondar in the late eighteenth century.

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<sup>1</sup>The translation was provided to the V&A during a visit made by colleagues from the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, January 2009.





Fig. 2.17: Hood of the Abun's vestment. White satin silk embroidered with gold, Ethiopia, 1747-1748. V&A 1424:1870

The embroidery on the back of the gown also features inscriptions but these are in the ancient Ethiopian Ge'ez script and it has not been possible to obtain translations of them. When it arrived in the V&A this was described in the Accessions Register as depicting 'Our Beloved Lord and the evangelists within medallions'. Christ is depicted at the centre of the cross which again resembles an Ethiopian processional cross. The four evangelists are pictured in medallions at each of the corners. Working clockwise from the top left: Matthew with an angel, Mark with a winged lion, John with an eagle and finally Luke with a winged ox.



Fig. 2.18: Embroidered back of the Abun's vestment. Crimson satin silk embroidered with gold, Ethiopia, 1747-1748. V&A: 1424:1870

Roger Acton described the looting of religious objects in a passage written for a commemorative book published by the Illustrated London News that collected together the reports and illustrations of its correspondents.

The fortress of Magdala, and whatever of value it contained, were next to be disposed of. Our soldiers had instantly laid hands upon all they could find, when they entered on the Monday evening; but they were obliged to give up every man his plunder, that it might all be sold and fairly divided. It was only in the Royal Treasure, and in the coffin of the Abouna Salama, in St. Michael's church, that any costly things were to be found. Ornamental shields, helmets, and weapons, dresses of silk and velvet, silver kettle-drums, and other such toys, were here abundantly stored up. Among other articles of price was the golden crown of the Abouna, dome-shaped, and properly surmounted with a cross, which had come off the top; it was adorned too with medallion portraits of the four Evangelists, whose names were inscribed beneath, in Ethiopic letters; and it had two ear-pieces of blue velvet, with pendant filigree decorations. This and the Abouna's silver slippers, a chalice of solid gold presented by King Adam Segud in 1560 to a church at Gondar, and other ecclesiastical paraphernalia, became spoils of British conquest. (Acton 1868: 75)

Much of what was looted, and certainly most of the things that entered the V&A collection had religious origins. The presence of many of these items at Meqdala was as a result of looting carried out by Tewodros II himself at Gondar in 1866 (Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church: 2009). Tewodros's relationship with the Ethiopian church had become fractious and the European captives reported arguments between the Emperor and Abuna Salama. In particular he was concerned that the Abuna's loyalty may lie with the Egyptians rather than himself due to the Ethiopian Church's links to the Coptic church of Egypt. He suspected the Coptic church of working on behalf of the Muslim rulers of Egypt and had, at one point, arrested both the Abuna and the Metropolitan of the Coptic Church while he was visiting Ethiopia. Tewodros II wrote of these fears in one of his letters to Queen Victoria Letter from Tewodros to Queen Victoria 'Your majesty can learn from those who fear the Lord the ill-treatment and abuse which I have received at the hands of the above-mentioned Europeans, and the Copt who called himself Metropolitan, the Abuna Salama.' (Quoted in Percy 1991: 229)



Tewodros also appears to have resented efforts by the Abuna to intercede on behalf of the captives and criticised him for involving himself in political matters rather than restricting his interest to spiritual ones (Percy 1991)

The V&A's collection of sacred objects looted at the Battle of Meqdala remains controversial because of the manner of their acquisition and their religious significance. There is an ongoing campaign for the return of these objects by an organisation called Afromet (Association for the return of the Maqdala Ethiopian Treasures). In 2008 Girma Wolde-Giorgis, president of the Federal Republic of Ethiopia wrote to Mark Jones, the Director of the V&A, at the time to request the return of material acquired at the Battle of Meqdala, in particular the gold crown described by Acton (M.27-2005). The crown remains in the V&A and is currently on display in the Sacred Silver Gallery (30/09/12)

## **Cole and Africa**

In 1863, a few years before the museum began collecting Ethiopian material a report was made for the Privy Council on Education entitled 'Art and Collections of the South Kensington Museum' and signed by Henry Cole. At this time the museum did not have an official 'collections policy'. This is the first document that laid out what the museum should be collecting and its role alongside other national museums:

the time has come when it is necessary that, as far as possible, definite instructions should be given to regulate the increase and completion of the Collection... Their Lordships accordingly direct that future purchases be confined to objects wherein fine art is applied to some purposes of utility, and that works of fine art not so applied should only be admitted as exceptions, and so far as they may tend directly to improve art applied to objects of utility... The decorative art of all periods and all countries should be completely represented.  
(Eleventh Report [1863], pp6-8 quoted in Burton 1999)

However, the report goes on to state that:

Where the taste of the age or country has been low, few specimens only will be necessary. On the other hand, where the art is excellent and tends especially to the improvement of modern manufactures, the specimens may be more varied and numerous.  
(Eleventh Report [1863], pp6-8 quoted in Burton 1999)

This meant that if African material was considered low there was no need to collect much of it, but some should be collected. So what was defined as ‘low’? And could African material be ‘high’?

Henry Cole addressed some of these issues in the speech mentioned in the introduction to this chapter. This speech was also directly linked to the Battle of Meqdala. The full title of the speech Cole gave at the missionary exhibition was ‘Abyssinian Art Especially, as well as Upon the Art of Savage Nations and People considered Uncivilised.’ The report of the speech in the Journal of the Society of Arts shows Cole arguing generally for the art of ‘savage’ nations, often comparing it favourably to European works. He is reported as saying that

principles of decorative Art exist in all art, however uncivilised the producers of it may be...The present exhibition showed visitors to it the invariable rule that the art works of savage peoples are based upon some system of principles. In main points their art is perfect ... Instinctively savages never sin against the nature of things.  
(Journal of the Society of Arts, January 21, 1870: 183)

This attitude is not particularly surprising from Cole who was driven by a belief that British and other European countries had lost sight of the basic principles of good art and design. Cole frequently championed the art and design of foreign countries and wanted British makers to learn true principles from looking at good examples. This was one of

the driving forces for the museum which had spent most of its original budget acquiring items from overseas and in particular India (see Chapter 1). What is different about this speech is that he talks specifically about Africa.

Cole gives examples from Turkey, India, Persia and West Africa but the main focus of his talk was Ethiopia:

With respect to Abyssinian art, the specimens exhibited that evening ought to interest those present, from the mere fact that the cost and difficulty of collecting them exceeded by a long way, the cost and difficulty in obtaining any other similar curiosities ever brought to this country. Never have there been such costly curiosities. The Kohinoor cost nothing compared to Theodore's crown which was obtained from Magdala by a Prussian attaché and graciously sent by the King of Prussia to this country.  
(Journal of the Society of Arts, January 21, 1870: 183)

The fact that he makes direct reference to Meqdala shows the extent to which this event continued to live in the public imagination at this time. Cole was good at promoting the V&A and his aim was to win support for the museum, so he was unlikely to risk offending potential supporters. However, Cole's enthusiasm appears genuine and he often displayed what Andrew Burton has called 'eager open-mindedness' (Burton 1999: 80). It would not have been out of character either in terms of aesthetic beliefs or personality for Cole to be genuinely enthusiastic and to mean what he said in his speech.

The moral which he drew from an examination of savage art was that it very often taught them true principles. He found throughout that art great modesty and occasionally great aptitude; and he was therefore rather obliged to the savages than otherwise for such a lesson. The teachings of that art had been useful, and he hoped that the Committee of the Exhibition would aid the nation in an endeavour to perpetuate the teaching which was to be derived from it. It would be his duty to represent to the Lord President of the Council that there ought to be at the South Kensington Museum a section for showing this humbler kind of art, such as it was, in order that even savages might afford instruction.

(Journal of the Society of Arts, January 21, 1870: 183)

It does not appear that Cole did take any further action to promote African art within the museum, but neither is it the case that African art was entirely excluded during the nineteenth century.

Henry Cole made some more specific comments about Ethiopian art. He saw it as being unchanged during the last 300 years. This could be seen in terms of the stereotypical view of Africa as a place of unchanging tradition rather than a place of development and progress. To Cole the idea of it being unchanging seems positive because it remains true to basic design principles. Cole also sees links in the Ethiopian objects to places from other parts of the world and earlier times.

Abyssinian art has some distinctive types of its own, but much has been borrowed from other countries...He found in the Abyssinian objects a certain propriety of ornament and proceeded to point out the merits of the workmanship in the crown, which is of the Byzantine type of ornamental work. The armlet seemed to him to have been inspired by Greek, Genoese, and Maltese motives. He also referred to a blue dress in the collection the ornament on which is somewhat similar to that on St Patrick's bell.

(Journal of the Society of Arts, January 21, 1870: 183)

The blue dress mentioned is likely to be one of the kabbas now in the MAA and the similarity to St Patrick's bell a reference to the large metal clasps found on them. Cole is interested in the link between Ethiopian art and Byzantine art. African art that is seen by Europeans as sophisticated is often assumed not to have been produced by Africans themselves. For example; Annie Coombes discusses at some length the belief in the late nineteenth century that the Benin bronzes could not have been produced by Africans (Coombes 1994). However, Cole is making a different argument. Ethiopian art does have similarities to Byzantine art and show influences from other parts of the world.

Cole was interested in design principles that transcended a particular region and could be applied more generally.

### **Summary**

The V&A had a significant collection of Ethiopian textiles (some now in the MAA, Cambridge), all of which came to the museum as a result of the battle of Meqdala, although they arrived by a variety of different processes. These objects reflect Ethiopian society of the nineteenth century as well as revealing some of the personal stories of people involved in the battle. The link to Meqdala means these objects presence in the V&A remains controversial. Henry Cole seems to have thought highly of these Ethiopian objects and there is nothing to suggest that at this time the V&A was deliberately excluding African material.

### **Chapter 3: Egypt and North Africa 1870-1897**

During the late nineteenth century the V&A began to take a keen interest in Egyptian textiles that were being found in burial grounds at this time. These textiles represent the largest collection of African textiles in the museum and were much appreciated when they were accessioned. During the same period the museum began to take a more modest interest in embroidery from the Maghrib, particularly Algeria and Morocco.

#### **The V&A in the late nineteenth century**

This was a difficult period for the V&A. Although the museum had been a success at the time of its opening, by the 1870s it seemed to have lost its way. Anthony Burton has characterised the late nineteenth century as being a time of '[d]eclining skills and diverging purposes' for the V&A (Burton 1999: 116-141). The museum appears to have been caught between its original purpose of a museum of design and manufacturing aimed at improving design education and a fine art museum. The V&A was being criticised in the press and visitor numbers were down. Burton argues that:

[The V&A] in the 1880s, however, while losing the artisans and manufacturers, was in a poor position to cultivate the collectors and connoisseurs. For Henry Cole's chickens were coming home to roost ... Cole decided [in 1863] to hire scholars only when he needed them, and to have only administrators on the permanent pay roll. The unfortunate consequence of this was a widespread belief that the museum staff lacked scholarly expertise.  
(Burton 1999: 130)

Helen Persson has argued that the textiles suffered particularly: 'Concerns were raised about the low standards of curatorial expertise, which it was felt, were unworthy of the collection. At the time the museum did little to encourage

object-based scholarship and in particular textile studies suffered.’ (Persson 2010: 5). This perhaps overlooks the work of Alan Summerly Cole who produced numerous catalogues on the textile collection during this period.

Concerns about the V&A led to questions being asked in Parliament about its budget and whether it was fulfilling its role particularly in regard to circulating objects to regional museums. A Select Committee was set up to investigate the museum, which met for the first time on 21 May 1897.

## **Egypt**

By far the biggest collection of African objects in the V&A is the collection of Egyptian textiles. Many of these are fragments. They differ significantly from other African textiles in the collection due to their age. Other African textiles in the collection are either nineteenth or twentieth century whereas the Egyptian textiles are archaeological finds. Due to their sheer number and archaeological origin they have been researched slightly differently to the other textiles in this study. There has been less close study of the textiles themselves. In addition, they are much better studied than other aspects of the African collection, notably by Helen Persson, a curator in the V&A’s Asian Department (Persson 2010). The research draws heavily on catalogues produced by the V&A dating back to 1887, which tell us a great deal about the museum’s attitude towards Egypt. By studying, in some detail, the largest group of Egyptian textiles to be acquisitioned by the museum and their subsequent treatment I hope to illuminate the collecting of these textiles by the V&A more generally.

## **Coptic Textiles**

The V&A began collecting Egyptian textiles in earnest in 1886 and today there are over 2,000 Egyptian textiles in the museum.<sup>1</sup> More than half of these were acquired between 1880 and 1910. Before 1880 the South Kensington Museum had only collected seventeen Egyptian textiles but between 1880 and 1890 they collected 601, this decade represents the peak of collecting from Egypt. Most of the Egyptian textiles in the V&A were designated as ‘Coptic’ but this term is now considered inaccurate as the term should, strictly speaking, only be used to refer to things made by the Copts, Egyptian Christians (Persson 2010).

However, the term remains in common use and Spring and Hudson define it thus:

Many extant early textiles, dating from the third or fourth century AD come from Egypt and are popularly designated as Coptic. The term encompasses garments and cloths bearing patterns showing Greek and Byzantine influence, together with those produced after the Arab conquest. However, although certain stylistic features were retained after the arrival of the Arabs, the exuberant plant and animal motifs were gradually replaced by inscriptions and geometric patterns. (Spring and Hudson 1995: 19)

The V&A collection also includes a large number of textiles from after 533 when North Africa became part of the Byzantine Empire under the Emperor Justinian, many of these textiles are now designated ‘Byzantine’ in the V&A records.

## **Henry Wallis**

The largest single group of Egyptian textiles was purchased through Henry Wallis (1830-1916) in 1886. Wallis was a British painter, writer and collector. He had a strong interest in archaeological finds, particularly ceramics. The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography states that ‘Wallis’s most notable

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<sup>1</sup> A search on CMS for the term ‘Egypt\*’ in the Textiles and Dress Collection on the 13/09/12 rendered 2,216 results.



achievement between 1885 and 1899 was to publish in twenty slim volumes, most of which he illustrated himself, his research into Persian, Egyptian, Greek, and Byzantine ceramics.’



Fig. 3.1: A square panel of tapestry woven wool and linen. Egyptian, ca. AD 300-500. V&A: 699-1886

Wallis had previously lent the museum some pottery but the first mention of him in relation to textiles comes on 26 August 1886 in a lengthy memo written by Mr. Armstrong, a curator in the V&A. Armstrong explains that he has been to visit Wallis to see a collection of textiles, some of which belonged to Wallis himself and others to an unnamed individual. He reported as follows, emphasising their interest to a decorative arts collection such as the V&A:

They are of the greatest interest as much from the decorative as from the archaeological point of view; and I should like to see them acquired for our museum. The textiles were nearly all in such a state of preservation that the design could be easily made out and in most of them both colour and pattern were quite clear.  
(V&A: MA/1/W330)

Collectors and archaeologists were often pleasantly surprised by how well preserved the textiles they found in the burial grounds were. This was due to Egypt's dry climate (Persson 2010: 3). It seems from the memo that the V&A had been keen to acquire some Egyptian textiles for some time. The memo also reveals some of the difficulties in acquiring material from Egypt in a competitive and secretive market and it is worth quoting the memo at some length.

The figures and animal subjects were more numerous and more interesting than those in the collection lately offered by Mr Graf who wanted £1,800 for 2000 pieces and refused to let us buy a portion of those submitted to us.

Mr Wallis wrote to me from Egypt several times in the winter urging us to secure some of these specimens which he saw in the possession of Brugsch Bey. This could not be done without inspection but we wrote to Brugsch Bey asking him to send the collection on approval and offering to pay expenses. To this proposal we received no reply but Mr. Wallis said Brugsch had told him that he would not consent to let them come to England on our terms.

It may be well to state here that Dr Bock had first brought this collection to our notice without of course telling us the name of the owner. To Dr Bock we made a proposal similar to that made to Brugsch but with no result.

While we were expecting an answer from Brugsch, a Mr. Graf came here bringing with him 367 specimens mounted in cards which he offered for purchase with others not then in his hands. They were carefully examined and although we recognized their value for the museum we did not close with him for we were hoping to hear from Brugsch and Graf would only give one day to decide.

It now appears that all these proposals were made with regard to the same objects.

There were good reasons for Brugsch Bey not wishing to make himself prominent as the vendor.

Until lately the secret of the source from which these interesting stuffs were obtained was well kept even in Egypt but now Mr Wallis has ascertained that they were found in mummies in Panopolis [Akhmim]. The store having been exhausted there was no longer any object in keeping the secret.  
(V&A: MA/1/W330)

The letter introduces a cast of German born Egyptologists. Mr Graf is likely to be Theodor Graf (1840–1903) who had a keen interest in textiles. In 1883 some of his textiles were exhibited in the K. K. Österreichisches Museum für Kunst and Industrie, Vienna and a book about his finds was written in the same year. The reference to Brugsch Bey is a little confusing. It refers to one of the Brugsch brothers but it is unclear which brother Armstrong means. Brugsch Bey suggests Heinrich Karl Brugsch (1827-1894) who was awarded the title Bey in 1873. But the same individual is referred to elsewhere in the file as E. Brugsch Bey. The initial implies Emile Brugsch (1842-1930) but I have found nothing to suggest he used the title ‘Bey’.

The textiles came from tombs at Akhmim on the banks of the Nile in Upper Egypt which were being explored at this time. Persson has written that ‘[T]he cemeteries [at Akhmim] remained surprisingly unlooted at the time of their discovery, but by the mid-1880s digging had accelerated as the demand from the antiquities market and international collections rocketed (Persson 2010: 4). This explains the desire for secrecy on the part of those involved in the excavations, they wanted to keep their finds secret to reduce competition for this clearly finite source. The Akhmim provenance was important as Persson explains:

Akhmim became synonymous with high-quality textile finds and dealers used the site as a selling point, attributing to it almost any ‘Coptic’ textiles, even when these had been excavated elsewhere.

The assigned provenance, therefore, cannot always be taken for certain.

(Persson 2010: 4)

The V&A were also keen to emphasise that the textiles in their collection were from Akhmim, a catalogue they produced of objects in the textile collection read:

The information to the actual locality whence the Graf specimens were taken is at present meagre. But it is well established that they were exhumed from burial places either in the neighbourhood of El-Fayum in Middle Egypt or that of Akhmin (Chemmis or Panopolis) in Upper Egypt. Those in the South Kensington collection come from Akhmin.

(Cole 1888: 12)

A large proportion of the V&A's Egyptian textiles collected after 1886 are said to have come from Akhmim. For example, those purchased from Greville Chester in 1887 (V&A: MA/1/C1212). Mr Armstrong reported and recommended purchase and proposed the collection should be sent for, on approval for Mr Tadema's inspection. (MA/1/W330) Mr Tadema was the painter Lawrence Alma Tadema. At this time the V&A sought advice from people outside the museum to act as referees for acquisitions. Alma Tadema was frequently asked by the V&A to act as a referee on acquisitions, particularly textiles. On 2 September Mr Tadema recommends the purchase of the collection at the sum asked, which was £300, and the Board agreed.

## **The Textiles**

The textiles acquired through Wallis in 1886 contained a large variety of pieces, many of them small fragments (Fig. 3.1). Persson explains why:

At the time it was also common practice among dealers and collectors alike to cut out the decorative elements from large fabrics such as garments or hangings and to sell them piece-by-piece in order to obtain the maximum profit...The commonly held view was that precious objects could be made more generally available the wider

they were distributed, so that today fragments from many individual cloths can be found scattered in different museums and private collections  
(Persson 2010: 4)

However, the V&A also acquired a number of complete, or near complete, tunics in the Wallis collection for example 632, 633 and 634-1886. Tunics were the most common garment found in Egyptian burial grounds (Williamson ed. 1986: 54).



Fig. 3.2: Linen Tunic with woven decorations. Egypt, fifth century. V&A: 632-1886

632-1886 is a woven linen tunic of simple construction. It is T-shaped with a straight slit for the neck opening. The tunic is 99 cm long and 137.2 cm wide including the sleeves. The tunic is decorated with bands that are 2.6 cm wide, two of these run over the shoulders on both sides of the neck and end in arrows.

These bands are known as clavi. Initially the number of bands on a garment was a sign of status but by the fifth century, when this tunic is dated to they were purely decorative (Williamson ed. 1986: 54). The bands on this tunic are decorated with rosettes and a snake or asp. There are two similar bands on each sleeve, close to the cuff, but decorated only with rosettes. In addition there are four 6.5 cm wide squares towards the bottom hem of the garment, two on the back and two on the front. They show a flower with eight petals. Both bands and squares are made of tapestry woven red wool and plain linen.

It is these decorative stripes and patches that are often cut off, for example 717-1886 is a double band from the cuff of a tunic similar to those seen on 632-1886. The decoration on these is more complex, consisting of rectangles filled with geometric patterns alternate with squares containing a sea monster. Again they are tapestry woven in wool, purple this time and plain linen. The strips are sewn on to a cloth which has a looped facing, this 'towel' effect featured in many of the 'Coptic' textiles acquired by the V&A.



Fig. 3.3: Tapestry woven wool and linen. Egypt. fifth or sixth Century. V&A: 717:1886

### **Alan Summerly Cole and the Descriptive Catalogues**

In 1887 *A Descriptive Catalogue of Tapestry Woven and Embroidered Egyptian textiles in the South Kensington Museum* (Cole 1887) was produced by the V&A and sold for one shilling. It was written by Alan Summerly Cole (1846–1934), son of Henry Cole. He produced a large number of catalogues of the V&A's textile collection. As well as the Descriptive Catalogue, he wrote a series of supplemental catalogues to cover new acquisitions. He also produced catalogues of the V&A's lace collection and wrote books on *Irish Lace* (1888) and *Ornament in European Silks* (1891). A note in the front of the catalogue explains that:

The following will form a section of a Descriptive Catalogue  
Tapestries and Embroideries in the South Kensington Museum, now  
in the press. On account of the interest attaching to the special  
collection and to which it relates and which has only recently been  
acquired by the Museum, some copies of this portion are issued  
beforehand.  
(Cole 1887: 2)

This quote highlights an important difference between these Egyptian textiles and the other African textiles. The decision to produce a catalogue before the full one was complete suggests that these textiles were the source of much interest and excitement in the museum. The esteem these textiles were held in is also suggested by the scientific tests the pieces were subjected to. Cole notes in his acknowledgements that:



Some samples of the material have been chemically tested by Professor Japp, F.R.S., and botanically investigated by Dr Scott, of the Normal School for Science, who have found that the woven threads with which the robes and cloths are made are of various qualities of flax.  
(Cole 1887: 16)

The interest seems to have been ongoing and in 1891 *A Supplemental Descriptive Catalogue of Tapestry Woven and Embroidered Egyptian Textiles, Acquired for the South Kensington Museum, between 1886 and June 1890* was published. A second supplemental catalogue was published in 1896 which covered acquisitions between July 1890 and 1894.

The essay in the front of the 1887 catalogue was reproduced exactly as part of a larger catalogue: *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Collections of Tapestry and Embroidery in the South Kensington Museum* published in 1888. This was a much larger catalogue of 432 pages, which was priced at two shillings and sixpence and contained several colour plates in the Egyptian section of the book showing objects from the collection (Fig. 3.4).<sup>2</sup> The catalogue goes on to explain the reason for the museum's interest in these textiles:

They offer to both archaeologist and antiquarian a wide field for investigation not only in respect of Egyptian costume of Roman and Byzantine periods (from 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. to 800 A.D.) but also as regards the various influences which gave birth to different styles of ornament. Shedding new light upon a development of certain artistic textile manufactures and processes, and illustrating survivals and modifications of older ornament the specimens are of peculiar value in a museum of art manufactures.  
(Cole 1888: 3)

The Egyptian textiles fit well with the museum's interest in understanding the development of design and ornament and finding good examples of them. One

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<sup>2</sup> Further references to the Egyptian essay will be taken from the larger 1888 catalogue as the 1887 version has become too delicate to handle.



of the V&A's main concerns, and one of the issues that led to its founding, was a concern about the quality of contemporary design.



Fig. 3.4: Plate 1 Showing Egyptian textiles. Descriptive Catalogue of the Collections of Tapestry and Embroidery in the South Kensington Museum (Cole:1888)

Cole was keen in his essay to trace the design influences that can be found in these textiles:

Suggestions are occasionally given in the Catalogue of the possible sources from which the patterns for these specimens may have been derived. Scarcely any possess the purity of treatment which is characteristic of the Periclean period in Greece. Nevertheless there are specimen showing a direct relationship to the matured ornament of such an epoch. Many of the designs are obviously due to Roman influences, and seem to belong more closely to a date after the better works of art had ceased to be produced for the Romans, and when a school of poor imitators was springing into existence.

(Cole 1888: 8)

Cole goes on to trace Greek, Roman, Persian, Oriental, Saracenic and Assyrian influences in the design of the textiles.

Although these textiles are now designated ‘Coptic’ due to the period they were produced in rather than an explicit link to the Copts, Cole seems to have believed they were produced by Copts and furthermore that Copts were particularly skilled.

The Copts may be regarded as the inheritors and perpetuators of ancient Egyptian talent in all classes of handiwork. They were, and to a large extent are, the skilled workmen of many Egyptian towns ... Whilst the Coptic temperament seems to have favoured a conservative tendency in preserving the traditions of various branches of handicraft or manufacture, it was nevertheless peculiarly sensitive to new influences; a trait which is brought out by the eagerness with which the Christian religion was adopted by the Copts. In the same way would the Copts be susceptible to the influence of new shapes, and patterns, which commerce or foreign domination brought before them.  
(Cole 1888: 12-13)

It is also important to note that the Descriptive Catalogue of the Collections of Tapestry and Embroidery in the South Kensington Museum made some effort to be true to the principles laid out in the Eleventh Report of 1863 that, ‘The decorative art of all periods and all countries should be completely represented.’ (Quoted in Burton 1999). As well as European examples it featured embroidery from China, Korea, South America and Ethiopia. It also included some pieces which were listed as ‘[s]aid to have been acquired in Morocco,’ of which more below.

## **North Africa**

During the late nineteenth century the V&A started to take an interest in North African textiles too, although on a much smaller scale to Egypt. Since the Tunisian textiles that came in via the Great Exhibition of 1852 (see Chapter 1) the museum had only collected seven textiles from North Africa, three from Algeria and three from Morocco. The Moroccan textiles were purchased from the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1867 (897-1869, 909-1869 and 910-1869). Between 1880 and 1890 the number of North African textiles increased to eighteen. Sixteen of the eighteen textiles came from Morocco, one from Tunisia and one is listed simply as 'North African'. The museum builds on this the following decade with the acquisition of a further 45 North African textiles, mostly from Morocco and Algeria.

Most of the pieces from North Africa collected by the V&A were examples of urban embroidery. There is a clear division between urban and rural textiles in the region.

The Arab invaders of Egypt and North Africa borrowed little in the way of costume from the indigenous people of the region. Thus, at this early stage, a visible division between rural communities and the conquering Arabs, who, resided in urban centres, was established. During the fifteenth century, Andalusian fashions spread to Morocco via Moorish and Jewish immigrants.  
(Spring and Hudson 1995 93)

The V&A's interest in embroidery from the Maghrib was probably motivated by the regions links to the Middle-East and Europe. Middle-Eastern design was well respected in the nineteenth century. This can be seen by the inclusion of Arabian, Turkish, Moresque (Alhambra) and Persian sections in Owen Jones's *The Grammar of Ornament*. As we have seen with the Egyptian textiles the

museum was interested in tracing how influences travelled. Spring and Hudson go on to address the question of embroidery.

Embroidery is largely an urban craft in North Africa, particularly ... in the Maghrib countries of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. As such it reflects, to a greater extent than the weaving tradition, the historical influences which have shaped the cultural development of the region. It was in the great towns that the immigrant craftspeople settled. Jews, Andalusians, Turks and Armenians all contributed to the dynamism of existing traditions by the introduction of their own repertoire of skills.  
(Spring and Hudson 1995: 111-112)

Embroidery, with its strong links to the Middle-East and Spain was of greater interest to the V&A than other textiles from the region. However, the interest in embroidery specifically also needs to be seen in the context of the V&A's other interests during the late nineteenth century. Namely, concern about the quality of needlework being produced at this time. Anne French has argued that during the 1870s the V&A was actively trying to improve the quality of needlework by providing historic examples in the collection and publishing lithographic plates for embroiderers to study (French, Forthcoming).

## **Algeria**

During this period the V&A acquired a number of examples of Algerian embroidery, albeit not always knowingly. North African textiles in the collection were often mistaken for work from other parts of the world. The majority of the pieces acquired were curtain panels or tanshifa, a woman's headscarf.

One of the most impressive pieces to come into the collection from Algeria was sold to the V&A by R. L. Playfair, British Consular General in Algiers and

numbered 24-1873(Fig.3.5). When it arrived in the V&A, it was listed as 'Partiere, or Doorway hanging ... Algerian, Previous to the French occupation.' (V&A Central Inventory 24:1873). The French occupation began in 1830, so if Playfair is correct this hanging dates from the early nineteenth century. The textile is 262 cm long and 30 cm wide. It has a 5cm fringe at one end only which suggest that this was intended as a hanging. There is a pattern approximately 48cm long repeated four times along the length of the piece with a fifth, squared off version of the pattern at the base. The design is made up of floral elements and scrolls, and has been worked in gold and silver thread and coloured silks of pink, green and blue. Other pieces in the collection (T.60-1915 for example) show several embroidered textiles like this sewn together, with ribbons in between to form a curtain. Hangings and curtains were often produced by women as part of their wedding trousseau (Spring and Hudson 2002: 11). However, none of the other examples are as heavily worked with metallic thread.

As well as being British Consular General in Algiers, R.L. Playfair, who sold this hanging to the museum, wrote a travel book entitled *Handbook for Travellers in Algeria and Tunis* first published in 1878. In it he describes the characteristics of the various peoples of the region such as Kabyles, Arabs, Jews etc. He has a category called 'Moors' which he defines as 'Arabs who lead a settled life, and occupy themselves in commercial pursuits rather than in agriculture.' (Playfair 1890: 11) He goes on to say that: 'In intercourse with strangers they are polite and courteous, and in character, lazy and indolent to excess. They have very little occupation, being principally involved in embroidery, weaving, distilling perfumes, and attending to their bazaars' (Playfair 1890: 11). This quote

expresses a stereotypical view of Arab people. This, apparently, did not prevent an appreciation of the things produced by the people or the hanging would not have been collected. This was a pattern that was to be repeated.



Fig. 3.5: Part of a door hanging, Algeria, nineteenth century. Silk and metallic thread on linen. 30 cm by 262 cm. V&A 24-1873

In 1893 the museum acquired its first complete Algerian door hanging (654-1893). This was made up of three pieces of linen embroidered with repeated circular floral patterns in purple and yellow silk. There is a border in a similar pattern. They are fringed at one end and joined together with a series of nine ribbons arranged symmetrically, the central ribbon is the largest one and has a floral pattern woven into it. These ribbons would likely have been imported from France. However, the V&A's interest seems to have been in the embroidery and not the complete object. A note in the Central Inventory by A.

F. Kendrick, dated 8 December 1897, reads 'This curtain has now been divided' he goes on to list the sizes of three separate portions. 654a-1893 is now 132.5 cm long and 45.5 cm wide while 654b-1893 is the same length but is wider, 68.5 cm wide, due to the ribbons attached.

As well as door hangings and curtains the V&A also began to collect examples of women's dress, although at this time the interest was likely to be in the embroidery on them which was often similar to that on the door hangings rather than as examples of dress.

In 1873 a tanshifa was acquired by the museum from a Miss Lee for £10. Unfortunately it has not been possible to trace any more information about the acquisition through the V&A files (1067-1873). A tanshifa is a scarf worn by women in the home draped around their shoulders or covering their hair, particularly on special occasions such as festivals, weddings and circumcision ceremonies. 1067-1873 is 264 cm long and 35 cm wide (Fig. 3.6). It has a two-tier fringe of about 5cm long at both ends. The tanshifa is made of loosely woven fine linen and decorated with embroidery in coloured silks, which is dense around the borders but also features some embroidery in the centre (other tanshifa in the collection have a blank space in the centre e.g. 267-1896). There are two bands of uncoloured embroidery and drawn work towards each end.

Spring and Hudson describe the typical patterns on Algerian tanshifa as follows

[L]arge restrained foliate patters, in red, blue or purple silk threads, interspersed with delicate flowers, often in pastel shades ... The scrolls and elaborate floral motifs were divided by horizontal lines of gold silk embroidery in geometric or highly stylised foliate patterns. (Spring and Hudson 1995: 55-6)



This description seems to match closely with 1067-1873 which has large red and blue patterns infilled with flowers and fruit in a paler palette and geometric drawn work dividing the pattern. Spring and Hudson go on to explain that ‘The inspiration for the designs ... seems to have been heavily dependent on Turkish patterns, North African tastes were accommodated through the orderly and controlled use of individual design elements and an emphasis on repetition (Spring and Hudson 1995: 6).



Fig. 3.6: Tanshifa, linen embroidered with silk, Algeria, nineteenth century, 264 cm by 35 cm. V&A: 1067-1873

The absorption of outside influences into Algerian embroidery practice may explain why this was listed in the V&A initially as ‘Persian’ and then later in Coles descriptive catalogue as ‘Turco-Syrian or Persian.’ In fact, a significant number of the North African textiles in the V&A collection were acquired in the belief that they were from somewhere else. For example, 329-1885 was



originally listed as Italian and later as ‘Italian or Oriental’ before being reattributed as being from Azemmour, Morocco. Item 386-1885 was changed from ‘Italian to Morocco’. 335-1885 and 336-1885 were also changed to Morocco from ‘Albanian or Cretan’ via ‘Italian or Turco-Syrian’ and ‘Italian or Oriental’ respectively. Object 335-1885 is from Azemmour (Fig. 3.7) 909-1892 is now believed to have been made in Xauen, Morocco, but was initially listed as Turco-Greek.



Fig 3.7: Embroidery, Morocco, nineteenth Century, V&A: 335-1885 (bottom piece)

These mistakes are understandable given the variety of influences found in North African embroidery and the fact that the study of these textiles was only beginning in Britain during the late nineteenth century. It would also be wrong to conclude that these pieces would not have been included if their true origin

had been recognised, as a number of pieces from North Africa were acquired in the full knowledge of where they had been made.

## **Morocco**

Included in Coles *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Collections of Tapestry and Embroidery in the South Kensington Museum* (Cole 1888) were three entries which were described as ‘Acquired in Morocco’ (340-1886, 341-1886, and 342-1886). The textiles were sold to the museum by Whitworth Wallis. At this time Whitworth Wallis was the director of the newly formed Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery which had opened in 1883. Before that he had worked at the V&A and from 1879-1885 he was in charge of Bethnal Green Museum, a branch of the V&A. All three were described as ‘Hanging or Cover for a Divan ?’. The catalogue entries contain a lot of question marks and were perhaps intended to be seen as a kind of ‘work in progress’ into the collection.

The entry for 342-1886 (Fig.3.8) highlights the difficulty museum staff were having knowing where these pieces came from, perhaps suggesting a reason for the careful wording ‘Acquired in Morocco’, namely that Cole was unwilling to commit to a definite origin. It states that ‘The interlacing ornaments suggest such as were used in the Moorish tiles (Azulejos) of Spain...The elaborated form of the star-formed wooden plaque of Saracenic and Persian origin.’ (Cole 1888). The entry for 341-1886 had a note saying that ‘This character of ornament suggests the mixture of primitive patterns (as used by wandering tribes) and elaborated geometric shapes, such as the Saracens in Cairo have used’. North

African textiles showed an array of influences which may have made it difficult to identify them for certain.

All three are examples of embroidery from Chefchaouen, a city in North West Morocco with a distinctive embroidery tradition. Chefchaouen was home to many Andalusian refugees and its embroideries resemble fifteenth century Hispano-Moresque embroideries, so Cole noticing a similarity to Azulejos in 342-1886 is unsurprising. Additionally Berber influences can be seen in the geometric, particularly the stepped, patterns (Vivier 2002: 62). Presumably it is the Berber people Cole is referring to when he writes ‘wandering tribes.’

Item 342-1886 consisted of a long strip of canvas with star and cartouche shapes attached. This is typical of Chefchaouen embroidery; 341-1886 is similar (Fig. 3.9 and 3.10). Both examples have been heavily decorated with coloured silk using tent stitch, although the patterns are quite different. The embroidery design radiates out from the star in the centre. The description of ‘Hanging or Cover for a Divan’ seems to have been accurate. Marie-France Vivier describes the use of pieces as follows: ‘The hangings, arid, which were either sewn onto bedspreads or hung in reception rooms either above the painted wooden chests or behind silk-brocade-covered divans; cushions; mattress and chest covers; and tablecloths were worked in counted threads.’ (Vivier 2002 :62)

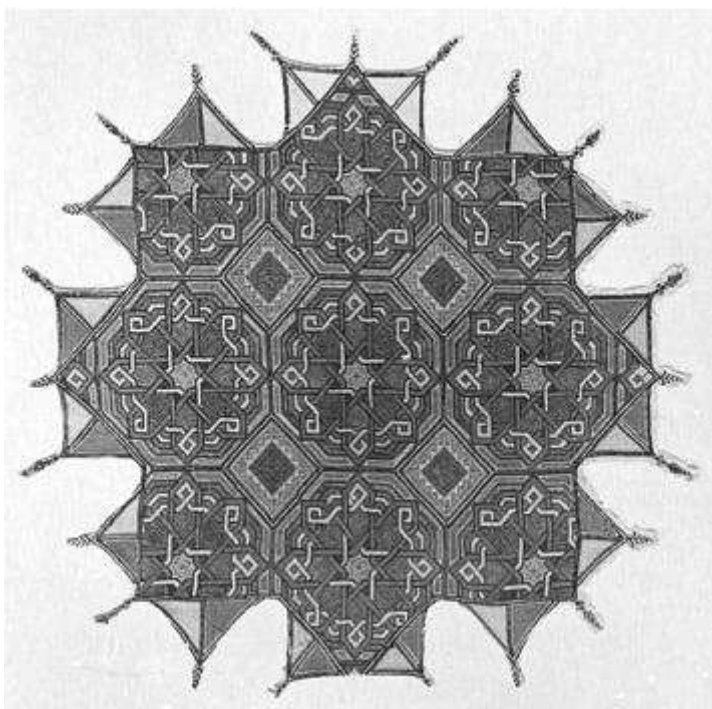


Fig. 3.8: Embroidered silk on linen, Chefchaouen, Morocco, nineteenth century  
V&A: 342-1886



Fig. 3.9: Embroidered silk on linen, Chefchaouen, Morocco, nineteenth Century  
V&A: 341a-1886

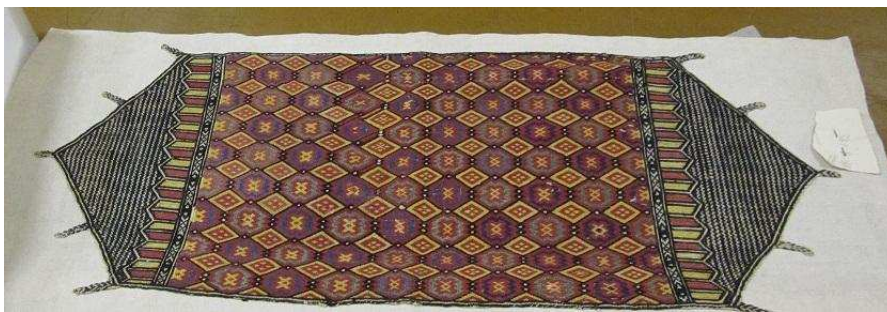


Fig. 3.10: Embroidered silk on linen, Chefchaouen, Morocco, nineteenth Century  
V&A: 341a-1886

340-1886 (Fig. 3.11), the third piece bought from Whitworth Wallis represents another style of Chefchaouen embroidery. It consists of a trellis-like pattern infilled with floral patterns. The predominant stitch used is cross stitch worked in coloured silks.

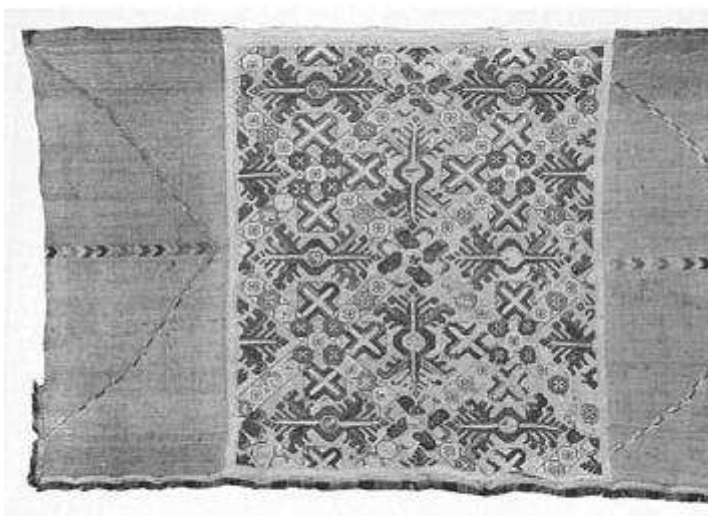


Fig. 3.11: Embroidered silk on linen, Chefchaouen, Morocco, nineteenth Century  
V&A: 340-1886

Both objects 341-1886 and 342-1886 were later cut into four and five pieces respectively, by the museum. It is not clear when this was done. At the same time the descriptions were changed from 'Cover for a Divan' to 'Needlework'.

This again emphasises what the museum's interest in these objects was; examples of needlework technique and design.

### **Summary**

Despite the problems the V&A faced at this time, and the criticisms of its lack of textile expertise, the museum amassed a large and important collection of Egyptian textiles. The V&A also collected some excellent examples of embroidery from the cities of Morocco and Algeria. This interest in North African embroidery was due partly to the regions historical, cultural and stylistic links to the Middle-East and Spain, and partly to a more general concern about providing good examples of needlework at this time. The interest in urban North African embroidery would continue over the coming decades, culminating in the 1920s.



## **Chapter 4: North African textiles, 1897-1924**

In 1897 Albert Frank Kendrick (1872–1954) became the head of the newly formed Department of Textiles at the V&A, a post he would hold until 1924. Under Kendrick the V&A continued its keen interest in Egyptian textiles and also collected North African material as and when the opportunity arose. The collection of North African material can be split into two categories. Firstly, the acquisitions of some excellent examples of North African costume. Secondly, the department began to take a more serious interest in embroidery from this region; an aspect of the collection successfully built on and expanded by Alan John Boyard Wace when he took over from Kendrick as head of the department.

### **Changes in the Museum**

When Kendrick became Keeper of the Department of Textiles in 1897 he was the first person to hold this post, as the museum was restructured at this time. In 1897 a Government select committee was set up to investigate the V&A, which had been subject to a great deal of criticism in the preceding years. One of the particular criticisms was a lack of expertise among the curators. Sir Caspar Purdon Clarke (1846-1911) had been made Museum Director in 1896, a post he held until 1905. While giving evidence to the Select Committee he explained he already had measures in place to address the issue of specialist expertise, as Anthony Burton explains:

In respect of staff, Clarke astonished the Committee by revealing his recent changes: the division of his staff into five curatorial departments, with a subject specialist in each. “I expect that in two or three years each of these men will know more about his subject than anyone we can find outside; he ought to with such opportunities.” It was put to him that this was a “tremendous internal reform”, and he

tactfully replied that “it had been coming on slowly; one of our technical assistants had gradually got all the textile works into his hands and was doing the work very well, and I thought it better to extend it to other branches”

(Burton 1999: 147, his quotes are taken from the Second Report from the Select Committee on Museums of the Science and Art Department: together with the proceedings of the Committee, Minutes of Evidence, Appendix and Index. Ordered by the House of Commons to be printed 23 July 1897.)

The museum was therefore divided into material-specific departments, with Kendrick as the head of the Textile Department. At this time it was also decided to split the Art and Science Museums; Science was to cross over to the west of Exhibition Road while the Art museum was to remain on the east side and be housed in a new building designed by Aston Webb. In 1899 Queen Victoria laid the foundation stone for this new building and it was at this point that the museum was renamed the Victoria and Albert Museum. The new building gave the Museum the chance to rethink how it ran its collection and display. At this time it was increasingly felt, particularly in Europe, that museums should be organised according to period and style, with a variety of objects to give a flavour of the time. However, the V&A decided to stick with its system of organising its displays around material (Burton 1999: 154).

## **Egypt**

Under Kendrick the Textiles department continued to collect Egyptian textiles. The museum did not source the textiles for itself, but relied on people in Egypt with local knowledge to act on their behalf. For example, they continued to purchase items from or through Henry Wallis. In 1898 Wallis offered the museum a collection of Egyptian textiles for £130; the museum offered £100 for



the collection and Wallis wrote back explaining his price. His letter gives us an insight into the market for Egyptian textiles at this time as earlier letters had too.

I had perhaps better explain the circumstances of their acquisition, when I think you will not find the price excessive. They were offered to me last winter as the result of a second discovery of a Xtian necropolis near Azzam in upper Egypt a site I had visited and found the whole of the tombs to have been searched and rifled. For this collection I was asked £100, and seeing its artistic and technical value and knowing these ... were ... gentlemen connected to continental museums ... it seemed to me desirable to secure it, if possible, for S.K.M. ... I obtained an abatement of the sum demanded, but only to the extent that it would cover the cost of conveying such objects to England. In this instance one of the pieces has been lost or stolen, this I have supplied by other examples of textiles of a similar period ... Only recently I have seen abroad specimens of a similar kind, some probably of this find, the prices demanded and paid were higher than I ask for these. Of one particular piece, another portion of the same garment, though in more perfect condition was in the hands of a Cairo dealer and he asked me £100 for it  
(V&A: MA/1/W330, part 3)

The V&A agrees to buy the collection for £110 confident that they can recover the extra cost by selling on parts of the collection to other museums, in this case Edinburgh and Huddersfield (V&A: MA/1/W330, part 3). This was a common practice for the V&A at this time as Persson explains.

[T]he V&A also had a system for accepting or buying textiles for distribution to other institutions in particular to Dublin and Edinburgh... State involvement in the running of these museums allowed for steady funding for acquisitions, which were then dispersed by the London museums. Instructions surviving in the acquisition files of the V&A inform us of this somewhat hierarchical process; 'pick the best and the rest to be sent to Dublin and Edinburgh'.  
(Persson 2010: 5)

Other important contributors to the Egyptian textile collection at this time included Major William Joseph Myers (1858-1899) and William Matthew

Flinders Petrie (1853-1942). Major Myers lent a large amount of Egyptian material to the V&A during his lifetime and 347 textiles were presented to the museum by the executors of his will following his death (V&A: MA/1/M33221). Again, it was common practice for the museum to borrow large amounts of material from Egyptologists for display in the museum.

Petrie was directly responsible for 81 Egyptian textiles in the V&A between 1889 and 1925, but Persson points out that:

[Petrie] was the driving force behind many more donations and that many further textiles came from his excavations...Petrie was behind donations of further 140 textile fragments during his lifetime, mainly through Kennard, and Haworth, the Egypt Exploration fund, and the British School or Archaeology in Egypt. (Persson 2010: 10).

During the 1970s further textiles collected by Petrie were given to the V&A by University College London (UCL) amid concerns that UCL was unable to properly care for or study the textiles (Persson 2010: 12).

The strength of the Textile Department's interest in Egyptian textiles during this period is revealed in the Report on the Principal Deficiencies in the collections of the Victoria & Albert Museum, &c., adopted by the Advisory Council at a meeting held on the 13<sup>th</sup> February 1914. (V&A: MA/15/12) This report seems to have come about due to concerns about the museum's declining purchasing power; in the face of a reduced grant and rising prices. The museum needed to decide how best to spend its budget in order to meet its aims which were reiterated in the report as follows.

The educational importance of the collections in this Museum is very great. The English people stand specially in need of education to

stimulate the craftsman and the manufacturer in the Arts of design, and a principal means of this education must be the presentation to the eye of specimens and patterns.

(V&A: MA/15/12)

Each department was considered and deficiencies were divided into two categories. A, those that were conspicuously absent and needed to be acquired; and B, those that should only be acquired if the terms were 'exceptionally favourable' as they were already well represented in the collection. Category A was further broken down into:

- (i) Objects which it would be possible to obtain if a substantial annual grant were allocated to the purpose
- (ii) Objects equally, or it may be more urgently, needed, but which, owing to their rarity or very high price, would only be obtainable when some special opportunity happened to offer itself.

(V&A: MA/15/12)

The following textiles were listed as being in category 'Ai'; fine silk fabrics of early date, early Central Asian patterned material, 'Mahometan textiles, especially the work of Egyptian craftsmen under the Fatimites,' Persian brocades and velvets, Chinese and Japanese textiles, Early English Embroideries, Tudor and Elizabethan costumes and early English lace. The 'Mahometan' textiles were further defined as:

Mahometan Textiles – (a) The earlier group:- These follow on from the Coptic group, and are not as fully represented as they should be. In particular the work of Egyptian craftsmen under the Fatimites is of unsurpassed technical perfection. The Victoria & Albert Museum possesses only two or three small examples, none of which are equal to the best specimens in Kelekian collection. Fragments occasionally come into the market and an attempt should be made to secure them.

(V&A: MA/15/12)

This reveals that the department was interested in its Egyptian textiles and keen to expand the collection to cover a greater range of dates. The Fatimid Dynasty ruled an empire in North Africa from AD 909 to 1171.

Kendrick had a personal interest in collecting Egyptian textiles as is shown by the publication between 1920 and 1922 of the three volume Catalogue of textiles from Burying grounds of Egypt. The first volume covered the Graeco-Roman Period (Kendrick 1920), the second the Period of Transition and of Christian Emblems (Kendrick 1921) and the third on the Coptic Period (Kendrick 1922). This book was more detailed and scholarly than that produced by Cole, and remains the main guide to the collection to this day.

### **Costume from the Maghrib**

The V&A began to collect examples of North African costume at the point when ‘traditional’ costume across the region was undergoing a great deal of change. Spring and Hudson point out that: ‘In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, increasing European influence in the North African economy, its politics and culture, led to a marked change in costume styles, especially by the urban elite.’ (Spring and Hudson 1995: 96).

### **Edgar Barclay**

In 1902 a collection of six North African garments were bought by the museum for £20 from Edgar Barclay (1842-1913), an artist and writer. All six pieces are referred to as ‘aabans’ in the V&A records and they were purchased by Barclay during his travels in Algeria (V&A: 505 to 510-1902). They were made and worn by Kabyle

women. The Kabyles are a Berber people from the Atlas Mountains in North Eastern Algeria. One of the interesting things about this collection of objects is their rural origin; most of the North African material in the Textile Department comes from the urban coastal areas. The reason for this is that these are the areas which are most influenced by Europe and the Middle-East as Spring and Hudson explain: 'Although external influences may filter down the economic scale, foreign elements are essentially an urban phenomenon, fully embraced by wealthy citizens, while only partially by the urban lower classes.' (Spring and Hudson 1995: 92). These aabans are very different as they come from the rural mountainous region.

All six of the cloths are made of tapestry-woven wool and cotton on a wool warp with short knotted warp-thread fringes at each end. In each of the six cloths the warp is a different colour to the weft and they are all decorated with parallel bands of colour, some of which are decorated with lozenges and other geometric devices. A wide variety of colours are used on the cloths including white, cream, purple, yellow, red, dark brown and several shades of blue. At the time they were made in the late nineteenth century, Algerian women made cloths such as this at home for their personal use. In its unwrapped form, the aaban resembles a blanket, and could be used for this purpose as well as a garment. The width of the fabric corresponds to the individual weaver's body length. The examples in the V&A collection range in length from 213.4cm and 294.6cm and in width from 119.4cm to 146cm.

To be used as clothes these cloths would have been draped around the body, fastened with shoulder brooches, and held in place at the waist with a girdle. The V&A also has a number of shoulder brooches made for use with aabans in its

collection. Several, for example 667-1893, a triangular shaped silver shoulder brooch decorated with enamel and coral and held in place by a pin and ring device, were accessioned in 1893 (Fig. 4.1).



Fig. 4.1: Shoulder Brooch, Silver, engraved and decorated with enamel and coral. Kabyle. Algeria. 5.75cm by 4cm V&A: 667-1893

This silver shoulder brooch would have been worn by Kabyle women with an aaban. The front and back are decorated with a pattern of silver wire forming spaces filled with enamel or coral. Coral was a popular decoration as it was believed to contain baraka (good luck), which offered protection from evil and enhanced fertility.

This brooch was probably made by a Jewish silversmith, as the Jewish population dominated the profession in North Africa until the late nineteenth century, as Berbers regarded working with metal a low status profession. In the

late fifteenth century many Jewish people had immigrated to North Africa bringing with them new jewellery techniques (such as enamelling) which they handed down from generation to generation.

More shoulder brooches were accessioned into the museum in 1900 including 732-1900 (Fig. 4.2)



Fig. 4.2: Shoulder Brooches. Silver decorated with enamel filigree and coral. Kabyle, Algeria. 28.5cm long. V&A: 732-1900

This brooch was described in the accessions register as follows

Ornament of enamelled silver set with coral, consisting of two brooches (ifizimen) for fastening the dress (aaban) on the shoulders, united by a chain with pendant scent-case. The brooches of penannular type have ornamental triangular plates to which the ends are attached; the chain consists of circular and spindle-shaped links united by rings. The square scent-case has three disc pendants hanging from rings. The surfaces are enriched with blue, green, and yellow enamel in cloisons, and the brooches and scent-case are set with pieces of coral. Price: £5. See Barclay, E. "Mountain Life in Algeria" 1882 Mrs. William Simpson, 19 Church Road, Willesden. Received 13th February 1900.

(V&A: R.P. 81725/1900)

It is interesting to note that in deciding to acquire this brooch the curator at the museum makes reference to a book written by Edgar Barclay, who later sold the six aabans to the museum.

Edgar Barclay was a successful etcher and painter of genre scenes and landscapes. His landscapes included depictions of North Africa such as Bay of Algiers and A Moorish Village, both of which were displayed at an exhibition of his work at the Grosvenor Gallery, London in 1878. Barclay visited Algeria several times between 1872 and 1880 and as well as paintings he also recorded his travels in a book entitled *Mountain Life in Algeria*, published in London in 1882.

Edgar Barclay collected these six aaban during his visits to Algeria in the 1870s. His book *Mountain Life in Algeria* (1882) describes the culture and lifestyle of the Algerian people and makes reference to the purchase of some women's garments which may be the ones in the museum.

Tuesday, April 13, 1880.— (...) On waking in the morning, we found a group of Kabyles waiting outside. They brought four handsome women's garments, and bargaining began, which ended in our buying these dresses cheaply, considering the labour bestowed upon them.

(Barclay 1882: 31)

In the book Barclay describes the process of weaving an aaban and is impressed by the complexity of the design that can be rendered using straightforward tools, although in this instance he fails to buy it so it cannot be in the museum collection.



This humble-minded artist was weaving a dress with elaborate patterns; yet she had no design before her to help, and moreover had to manufacture her own machine and arrange the threads, I was astonished at the simplicity of the loom; the warp was fixed in an upright frame made out of canes; she used no shuttle, but passed the woof from side to side with her fingers, and jammed it home tight with a metal handcomb, a most laborious method of weaving. But because the mechanical means were rude, let not the reader imagine that the work was so, for exactly the reverse is the truth. She brought an old dress made some years before, much used, but most beautiful in workmanship, design, and colour—Indeed, as a piece of colour it excelled all other woven cloths that we saw in that part of the country. I made her understand that I had bought some dresses, and that I should like to possess that one, but she seemed loath to part with it.

(Barclay 1882: 34)

Edgar Barclay feared that the beautifully patterned textiles created in this way were becoming a lost art, and so purchased examples to ensure their survival. In a letter to the V&A dated 26 February 1902, Barclay relates:

When travelling in Algeria about twenty-five years ago I became possessed of some good specimens of woven woollen cloths with patterns, they are in reality women's dresses and woven at home by Berber women for their own use. At that time the better specimens were fast disappearing and although the women continued to weave they were not doing such careful or interesting work. These cloths are therefore curios and I venture to enquire whether you would consider such things suitable for your Museum.

(V&A: RP 6659/1902)

Barclay had written about his concern about the decline of weaving in North Africa in his book twenty years earlier, blaming the influx of cheaper European produced cloths into the area.

Before long these serviceable and interesting dresses will have disappeared, and the unfortunate women will then feel the improving effects of modern civilisation, by having nothing to wear but villanous coloured pocket-handkerchiefs, and chilly white cotton goods. Yes, alas! from the draperies of antiquity to dresses of Manchester printed stuff, intended to be cut into handkerchiefs, is a too easy and inevitable jump.

(Barclay 1882: 54)

## **Jewish Costume**

The V&A also acquire a number of items of Jewish dress from North Africa. Firstly in 1908, they accessioned a dress, a jacket and a head-dress. In October 1908 the following letter was received by the museum.

Dear Sir,

I am requested by Madame Blumenthal to say that she desires to present the museum the costume of a Tunisian Jewess. The head dress is of great antiquity, but the robe and the jacket were embroidered about forty years ago when the costume was still worn by wealthy Jewesses in Tunis and Algiers. Should you wish to accept the gift Madame Blumenthal would be greatly obliged if you could send here for it as she is leaving this house in a few days and all her servants are overwhelmed with work.

Perhaps you would kindly send a card with the messenger that there should be no mistake.

Yours Faithfully

G Harrison

(V&A: MA/1/B1735)

The textiles department decided to acquisition the costume (519-1908 and 519a-1908) for a number of reasons, firstly because there is nothing else like it in the collection and they think the head dress in particular is decorative and interesting. They also think it will fit well with the existing collection of 'Jewish dress or ritual'. (V&A: MA/1/B1735) The fact that these outfits are now believed to have fallen out of use is an added attraction as a note made by Kendrick on 13 October 1908 reveals: 'The silver headdress apparently of the 18<sup>th</sup> century could be exhibited at once, the embroidered costume might be kept as a record of style no longer in use.' (V&A: MA/1/B1735)

The dress is made up of blue cotton velvet. It is 147cm long and 154cm across at the widest part, which is around the base of the dress. The dress is made up of two central panels (one for the front, one for the back) which run the full length

of the dress and are 48cm wide. The dramatic flaring of the dress (from 48cm at the shoulders to 154 at the hem) is achieved by sewing in additional triangles of fabric, one on each side of the central panels in the top half of the dress and three on the bottom half. The arm openings are 53cm long and decorated with 4cm of braiding. The dress fastens on the right shoulder with a yellow ribbon. The main decoration of the dress is around the neck. There is gold embroidery with a floral pattern and in a triangular shape on the chest and further sprays of embroidery on the back, roughly where the shoulder blades would be. The plastron is quite stiff and appears to have been made using a cardboard template which had gold thread sewn over it.

With the dress arrived a maroon cotton velvet jacket (Fig.4.3). This too is elaborately decorated with gold braid and embroidery, particularly along the sleeves. The jacket is 63cm long down the centre of the back and 59cm across at its widest point. The jacket fastens with a single clasp that is covered in gold thread.



Fig. 4.3: Woman's jacket Maroon Velvet lined with cotton and embroidered with gold and silver thread, nineteenth century Tunisia. V&A: 519-1908

The sleeves are 51cm long with a 23cm opening running up from the cuff. The opening has 12 metal buttons on one side and corresponding eyelets on the back. Most of the jacket is lined with printed cotton but the cuffs which could be glimpsed while the jacket was being worn are lined mostly with woven pink and gold silk, to which a contrasting border of green silk has been added (Fig. 4.4).



Fig. 4.4: Woman's jacket Cuff detail nineteenth century, Tunisia V&A: T.519-1908

The materials used and the amount of work that went into the construction of these pieces suggest that this would have been a prestigious and valuable garment. The Jews of North Africa were particularly known for their metal thread embroidery but they were not only producing it for their own community (Spring and Hudson 1995: 92).

Two similarly shaped dresses from North Africa were also accessioned during this period. The first in 1916 (T.131-1916) is made of pink damask silk and is

137 cm long and 100 cm across at its widest point. The dress is again made of a straight central panel which runs the length of the garment with pieces sewn to the sides to create a more triangular shape. The dress is fastened with ribbons on both shoulders. There is a floral pattern of embroidery around the neck. The embroidery continues around the armholes with a pattern of leaves and stems. The hem is decorated with two tiers of black velvet. The dress was given to the textiles department by Gertrude Jekyll, the well known garden designer, along with a number of other pieces and was recorded as ‘Worn by a Jewish woman, Algerian, 18<sup>th</sup> century.’ (V&A Central Inventory T.131-1916).

A third dress with this triangular shape was accessioned in 1921, this time of red and black silk. This dress was given to the V&A by an architect named Sydney Vacher.



Fig. 4.5: Woman's silk dress with embroidery, Algeria nineteenth century  
112cmx135cm V&A T.257-1921

In Fig. 4.5 the triangular shape of these dresses can clearly be seen. Again this has been achieved by adding pieces to the sides of a central panel. At the time of its arrival in the V&A it was noted in the Central Inventory that '[t]he material

was probably woven in France (Lyons) about 1850.’ (V&A Central Inventory: T.257-1921) The use of French silk is not particularly surprising in urban parts of North Africa at this time, as the region had strong trade links with Europe across the Mediterranean. Spring and Hudson have argued that:

The period from the late nineteenth century until the beginning of the early twentieth century was dominated by an increase in European economic influence. Once again, the fluctuating political situation was reflected in the appearance of innovative dress styles, inspired by European – especially Parisian- fashions. (Spring and Hudson 1995: 21)

In this dress it is possible to see the influence of French fashion in the use of material but the shape of the dress and the decoration are Algerian. The embroidery is again a floral pattern around the neck with a leaf design extending down the arm openings (Fig. 4.6).



Fig. 4.6: Silk dress, neck embroidery, Tunisia nineteenth century (V&A: T.257-1921)

A different type of Jewish clothing was accessioned in 1912 and is much more clearly an example of specifically Jewish clothing than the previous dresses. The



reasons given by P.B. Trendell, a curator in the Textiles Department, on the 7 May 1912 for acquiring a second example of North African Jewish costume point out this difference to the other dresses 'There is only one Jewish costume of the 19<sup>th</sup> century from North Africa in the museum No.519-1908, worn by a Tunisian woman ... but it is of quite different cut. The gift would be an acceptable and interesting one for our collection.' (V&A: MS/1/GS69)

The costume is made up of a blue velvet jacket and a crimson velvet bodice, and would have been completed with a skirt. The outfit also included a long veil and four sashes of silk brocade woven in striped and floral designs, and a pair of red leather shoes, also embroidered, all still in the collection (T.174-912 to T.181-1912).



Fig. 4.7: Ceremonial jacket worn by a Jewish woman; embroidered velvet, nineteenth century, Moroccan V&A T.174-1912

This ceremonial jacket is made of dark blue velvet lined with linen and fastens with silver filigree buttons (Fig. 4.7). The jacket has been decorated with applied brocade; the pattern is dominated by three spirals arranged vertically on each side of the opening. These three spirals are repeated on the shoulder of the garment horizontally. This makes it likely that this outfit was a marriage outfit. Spring and Hudson have said that these patterns are typical of wedding costumes made and worn by Jews in Tetouan, where this outfit was purchased. Although women also wore these outfits after they were married on special occasions such as circumcisions, other people's weddings and community events. (Spring and Hudson 1995: 57) Spring and Hudson also point out that this pattern is repeated on funeral shrouds. They argue that 'Spiral patterns are frequently connected with infinity and the expression of a belief in the afterlife, and have been recorded as elements carved onto Moroccan tombstones.' (Spring and Hudson 1995: 59).

A letter from the donor, Miss F. L. Gilbard, gives us some more information about these clothes and an interesting insight into how she used them. She explains that the outfit was bought in Tetouan 'many years ago' for the price of £70.

I have in my possession the coat, veil and sashes of a Moorish Jewess and which are generally heirlooms, but I managed to secure one, some years ago – it is all velvet and gold thread embroidery, the skirt was lost, so I had to have it copied, now as I am too old to wear it to fancy balls and I have no-one to give it to, I was wondering if it were any use to your Museum.  
(V&A: MS/1/GS69)





Fig. 4.8: Bodice, part of the costume of a Jewish woman; embroidered linen, nineteenth century, Moroccan V&A: T.175-1912

Miss Gilbard says that outfits such as this were generally handed down through the generations, which was probably a recent tradition at the time she acquired the dress. Spring and Hudson have written that:

In urban Morocco, Jewish brides were given sumptuous wedding costumes by their fathers; as the cost of these outfits increased the custom was abandoned and, by the early twentieth century, women were obliged to borrow such items from their mothers and grandmothers.

(Spring and Hudson 1995: 69).

The V&A collected a number of examples of Moroccan Jewish costume during a period when dress was changing in response to social and economic changes in North Africa.

### **Tunisia**

A Tunisian costume was given to the V&A in 1920 by Lord Stanmore. 'Objects Submitted on Approval for Gift' dated 1 June 1920 offers a number of things to

the museum, most to the Indian Section. However, there is also a complete outfit from Tunisia listed as follows:

J. 'Dress of Honour' given by the Bey of Tunis to Lord Stanmore's grandfather about 1825-1830; consisting of  
 2 Cloaks (one of white silk)  
 2 Zouave-like jackets  
 2 Waistcoats  
 1 Trousers  
 (V&A: MA/1/S3117)

The objects were acquisitioned and assigned the numbers T.80-1920 to T.86-1920 and a letter was sent from Cecil Smith, the Director of the V&A to Lord Stanmore on 5 June 1920.

I beg to offer you sincere thanks for the generous gift of the undermentioned objects (Sinhalese, Indian and Tunisian), which are accepted with much pleasure for inclusion in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum. I may add that we are especially pleased both with the choice of 18<sup>th</sup> century swords and daggers from Ceylon, and the sumptuous Tunisian costume of the period 1825-1830.  
 (V&A: MA/1/S3117)

Unfortunately it is not possible to assess the sumptuousness of this costume because it has been lost by the museum. This outfit was potentially interesting from another point of view: on 6 June 1921 Kendrick wrote to Lord Stanmore asking for some clarification

My Lord,  
 A question has arisen about the 'Dress of Honour' given to your lordship's grandfather by the Bey of Tunis in the earlier part of the last century and presented by you to this Museum last year. We should be very glad to know, in order to have an accurate official record, whether the recipient of the robe was the fourth Earl of Aberdeen?  
 (V&A: MA/1/S3117)

Lord Stanmore responds on 26 June to confirm that the outfit was presented to the fourth Earl of Aberdeen. Lord Aberdeen was the British Prime Minister from 1852-1855. He had also been Foreign Secretary from 1828-1830 and Secretary of State for War and the Colonies between 1834 and 1835. Given that the costume was dated as being made between 1825 and 1830 when it arrived in the museum (although the source for this date is not clear, possibly it came from Lord Stanmore) it seems likely that it was in this role that he received the costume. He was again Foreign Secretary between 1841 and 1846.

### **Embroidery**

Kendrick was interested in embroidery, he wrote a textbook on 'English Embroidery' in 1905 and a second one entitled English Needlework in 1933.

Kendrick was also interested in the role of museums collections in both recording and encouraging the development of embroidery as French points out:

The question 'But what can the museum do to encourage embroidery?' was posed by A. F. Kendrick...in the Museums Journal of 1909 ...In this short piece he outlined an idealised relationship between an embroiderer and museum collections...Kendrick assumed that a symbiotic relationship between historic pieces of art and contemporary work lay behind the formation of many museum collections.

(French: Forthcoming)

Collecting objects for practitioners to study and so improve their own work lay at the core of the V&A at the time of its founding and was central to the interests of Kendrick, and later his successor Wace. Although some of the pieces discussed in this section are items of dress and could therefore be included in the 'Costume' section of the chapter, they have been included here as the museum's interest in them at the time seems to have been as examples of embroidery rather than dress.

## Morocco

It is worth looking in some detail at the acquisition of certain textiles while Kendrick was Keeper of Textiles because they reveal the basis of the work that the department was later able to build on under Wace. Although embroideries from Morocco were acquired in much greater numbers while Wace was in charge of the department, some of the finest quality pieces were acquired during this earlier period, perhaps a sign that these items were becoming rarer and harder to acquire. Kendrick, like Wace later, was keen to fill up gaps in the collection. This is shown by the purchase in 1905 of three Moroccan embroideries from a Professor J. Belisha. The V&A receives the following eight items for consideration:

3 Scarves for covering the head: one with finial ornament (stained and torn) £2, one with zig-zag border (stained) £2.10s, one on damask chequer ground £2.10s(or) £6 the three.  
 1 Cover for dishes (much damaged) 15s.  
 1 Curtain worked with crimson silk squares etc. (stained and torn £3.10s). 1 Cloak or hanging, striped £2.10s.  
 1 Square Pillowcase with gold braid (stained) £1.10s.  
 1 Long pillow case, worked with black silk (stained) £1.10s.  
 (V&A: MA/1/B1001)

The scarf on a damask chequer ground (371-1905) the cover for dishes (372-1905) and the curtain (373-1905) are accessioned into the museum. Kendrick and Trendell make the following case for buying the pieces they have selected as suitable for the museum in a report dated 10 March 1905.

None of these Moorish embroideries are represented in our collection.

The most desirable seem to be the effective curtain with red squares, and the small damaged cover which has an interesting combination of floral designs in pleasing colours and varying stitch like sampler work. The price of the curtain should be reduced.

The scarves do not appear very old, and the borders are of debased and crowded patterns, but if one is needed as an example, the scarf with the chequer ground might be selected, at a lower price, The remaining pieces are unsuitable as too modern for the museum. (V&A: MA/1/B1001)

This question of North African embroidery being poorly represented in the collection was raised again in 1914 concerning the purchase of five examples from a Florence M. Carse (wife of the painter A. Duncan Carse and mother to the explorer Duncan Carse). A note from Kendrick to the Director of the museum on 7 March reads ‘We are very badly off for Moorish embroideries; this opportunity has presented itself of acquiring some useful examples at a moderate price. We should very much like to have the selection at £10.’ (V&A: MA/1/C566). This particular purchase included pieces that are incomplete such as T.57-1914, which is a section of border from Azemmour. This suggests an interest in the techniques demonstrated. The embroidery is completely separated from the way it may have functioned for the person that made it.

## **Algeria**

The museum continued to collect Algerian textiles after the Textiles department was created in 1897. The following year another curtain panel was accessioned, 673-1898 (Fig. 4.9). The embroidery design on this is different to examples previously discussed but is typical of Algerian embroidery. It is made of loosely woven linen and has a pattern of pale purple worked in Algerian star stitch. Spring and Hudson write that these foliage forms are derived from Italian Renaissance patterns (Spring and Hudson 2002: 31). This again emphasises the number of different influences that could be seen in North African urban embroidery. The purple pattern is interspersed with floral patterns in other

countries. There is a narrow border of drawn work near to the end. Unusually, this panel has been made from two strips of linen joined together in the middle.



Fig. 4.9: Curtain panel, embroidered silk on linen, 241cm by 43cm V&A: 673-1898

The largest group of Algerian textiles arrived in 1915 as a donation from a Mr T.B. Clarke-Thornhill. Clarke-Thornhill seems to have been quite a collector, notably of coins and manuscripts. He also donated a collection of Asian objects to the Pitt-Rivers museum where he was listed as a ‘Diplomat Colonial Servant’. These textiles were part of a selection of twenty embroideries from Greece, China, Japan, Romania and Algeria. In a minute from Kendrick to the Director dated 22 June 1915, he singles out the Algerian pieces for special mention. ‘The whole of these things will be very welcome additions to the Museum collections; the Algerian section specially is remarkably fine and forms a more important series than that already in the museum.’ (V&A: MA/1/C1672/1) Kendrick goes on to suggest that a letter should be written to Mr Clarke-Thornhill from the Museum Director; a note in the file says the letter was sent the following day:

Kendrick has shown to me the collection of embroideries and woven stuffs received on Saturday as a further gift from you. We don't know how to thank our friends who are so kindly helping us through a year which, without their generosity, would be a blank one so far as acquisitions are concerned.

The Algerian embroideries are most beautiful. In consequence of this gift our Algerian section has become sufficiently important to justify the preparation of a special catalogue which we hope to set in hand without delay. In due course it will form the Algerian section of a larger catalogue.

While thanking you in the name of the Museum for the generosity which makes a distinct advance in the progress of our embroidery collections, I would like to add my own personal thanks for this very gratifying token of your sustained interest in the museum.

(V&A: MA/1/C1672/1)

Kendrick was true to his word and later that same year the museum produced a Catalogue of Algerian Embroideries, although the larger catalogue he refers to does not appear to have been completed.

In the introduction to the Catalogue of Algerian Embroideries the coming together of the collection is explained:

The small collection of Algerian embroideries in the Museum, gradually accumulated as opportunity offered was, was augmented in the month of June 1915 by a munificent gift from Mr. Clarke-Thornhill of examples secured by him in the country of their origin, at a time when the acquisition of such fine specimen's was not so difficult as it has since become.

(Victoria and Albert Museum 1915: 1)

This confirms that the museum was interested in North African embroidery when it had the opportunity to collect it. It also reveals that the museum was keen to collect these textiles while they were still available. This was a concern that was re-iterated over and over again in relation to North African embroideries before World War II.

Importantly, the catalogue essay also makes clear the sort of North African embroideries the museum is interested in collecting:

It should, however, be remembered that the aboriginal Kabyles or Berbers, whose descendents still survive in considerable numbers, practise a much cruder kind of embroidery based on purely geometrical motives. This work is not represented in the collections. (Victoria and Albert Museum 1915: 1)

The museum is interested in the work of the urban communities with strong links to the Arab world and not the rural peoples. The catalogue goes on to emphasise the links between Algerian and Turkish embroidery, further suggesting that these objects were appreciated in the context of Arabic and middle-eastern design.

The frontispiece of the catalogue features a number of the embroideries, they appear to be on display (Fig. 4.10). Four out of the five pieces pictured were given by Clarke-Thornhill.





Fig. 4.10: Frontispiece from Catalogue of Algerian Embroideries (Victoria and Albert Museum: 1915)

The frontispiece image features a curtain similar to those described in Chapter 3 but this was one that was kept complete (T.60-1914), a tanshifa (T.64 1916) which was described in the catalogue as a towel scarf, a decorated panel (T.62-1915) and two *baniqa*'s (headscarves) to the front (880-1897 and T.63-1915). A *Baniqa* is an embroidered cap used by Algerian women to cover and wrap their wet hair after bathing. The example given by Clarke-Thornhill to the museum, T.63-1915, is 120cm long and 19cm wide (Fig. 4.11). It is made of a single piece of linen that has been folded in half and embroidered with floral patterns in

silk and metallic thread. The scarf is joined together along the top of the back by a blue ribbon that has been sewn in to create a kind of bonnet. At the bottom there is a border of drawn work in floss silk.



Fig. 4.11: Baniqa: Embroidered silk on linen: 120cm by 19cm nineteenth century, Algerian. V&A: T.63-1915

Neither of the Algerian pieces that the museum acquired in 1873, 24-1873 and 1067-1873, were featured in the catalogue (see Chapter 3). It is unclear why as they represent some of the finest pieces in the museum collection. It is possible that the tanshifa (1067-1873) had not yet been identified as Algerian despite its similarity to others in the collection, for example T.391-1912.

The textiles department continued to collect Algerian embroidery. For example, the following year, along with the dress discussed above, they received a number of Algerian embroideries as a gift from Gertrude Jekyll again including baniqas, tanshifas and curtain panels (T.125-1916 to T.132-1916).

**Summary**

From 1897 when the Textiles Department was founded until 1924 it was run by A.F. Kendrick. During this period the department continued both to increase its holdings of Egyptian textiles and to research them in greater depth than had previously been possible. The textiles department also began to take a greater interest in North African embroideries and built a strong, if small, collection of Algerian embroideries. This interest in North African embroidery would be built on under the department's next director A.J.B. Wace (see chapter 6).

## **Chapter 5: West Africa, 1897-1924**

During the late nineteenth century European activity in Africa increased and Britain's formal Empire in Africa expanded. As this happened the V&A accessioned a greater number of textiles from Africa, most of which came to the museum as a result of gifts or sales from people who were involved in Africa as colonial officials or traders or their relatives.

### **Introduction**

Despite actively collecting textiles from Egypt and North Africa during the first forty years of its history, the V&A did not take much interest in African textiles from south of the Sahara. The Ethiopian textiles discussed in Chapter 2 were an exception. From 1897 the V&A continued to focus on North Africa (see Chapters 4 and 6) but there was also a notable increase in collecting from Sub-Saharan Africa between 1897 and 1924. In the period from 1852 to 1897 37 items from sub-Saharan Africa were accessioned by the textile department; twenty four of these were the Ethiopian items discussed in Chapter Two. The rest were made up of two pairs of shoes and six grass mats from West Africa, a cap from East Africa and two examples of Madagascan weaving (AP2-1882 and AP3-1882) donated to the museum in 1882. Only the shoes and the cap remain in the collection. Five of the grass mats were disposed of in 1933 and the final one in 1958. The Madagascan weaving was donated to Leeds Museum in 1994 (see Chapter 9) where they have been given the catalogue numbers LEEDM.F.1992.0004.0009 and LEEDM.F.1992.0004.0004.

Between 1898 and 1925, 39 pieces were collected mostly from West Africa. Eighteen of these remain in the collection. The fate of the other 21, along with a more detailed

discussion of the issues surrounding removal of objects from the museum can be found in Chapter 6. The fact the textiles collected by the V&A are no longer available makes it very difficult to be certain about what these textiles were, a problem made worse by the issue that once they have been removed from the collection only the most skeletal archival records of them are kept. While it is necessary for museums to remove things from their collections the high proportion of African items that were disposed of means that the picture of the museum's sub-Saharan textile collection we have may be badly distorted.

## **Empire**

During the late nineteenth century British Empire in Africa was formalised. Crucial to this process was the Berlin 'West African Conference' of 1884-1885. European presence and commercial competition in West Africa was beginning to have a destabilising effect on the region. The conference came about because European powers were increasingly concerned about making sure free trade could continue. Two major decisions were made at the conference firstly King Leopold II of Belgium had his authority in the Congo recognised in return for agreeing that European traders from other countries could have access to the region. The second decision taken was that the claims of a European Government to control a region of Africa would be recognised if they should demonstrate that they were already effectively in control of the area. This would lead eventually to the whole continent, with the exception of Ethiopia being, nominally at least, under European control.

This increasing commitment to Empire in Africa by the British Government meant that larger numbers of British subjects were travelling to Africa as traders, military

personnel, colonial officials and missionaries. Most of the objects acquired by the V&A during this period came into the museum as gifts, bequests or sales from people who had been to Africa.

Annie Coombes has studied in detail the role of the Benin Bronzes on the image of Africa shown to the British public. The bronzes were acquired by the British during a punitive raid on Benin City in 1897 and displayed in British museums. Coombes argues that:

This emphasis on the necessity of ‘civilisation’, which meant saving the ‘savage’ from apparently continuing on the road to self-destruction, was an important component in the presentation to the British public of the necessity for a permanent European, and preferably British, presence in Benin as a moderating force.  
(Coombes 1994: 10)

This need to present Africa as savage would make its material culture unsuitable for display in a museum of art and design.

Coombes has traced the development of ethnography as a discipline alongside the development of colonial rule in Africa; this new discipline would claim Africa within its field:

[T]he curators of ethnographic material cast themselves in the role of benevolent educators, dispensing rational and more particularly ‘scientific’ knowledge about the colonies and their indigenous peoples. As a self-image, this relied on distinguishing a set of referents and terms which qualified their contribution as ‘scientific’, and which differentiated knowledge defined as ‘anthropological’ or ‘ethnographical’ from other forms of knowledge of the colonies. To this end, the effectivity of the ethnographic collections depended on promoting the material culture in its custody, as, simultaneously: fodder for purportedly disinterested scientific and comparative study of culture; as ‘proof’ of racial inferiority (and therefore a justification of colonial intervention).  
(Coombes 1994: 43-5)

However, during the late nineteenth and early years of the twentieth century while this process was still in flux, the V&A collected a number of African textiles focussing on unusual techniques. It is only later, from the 1920s that the museum starts to seriously consider whether objects should be considered art or ethnography (Chapter 6).

## **Nigeria**

Most of the Sub-Saharan textiles in the V&A come from West Africa, this reflects Britain's longstanding involvement in the region and also the strength of textile production in the area. The largest group of African items to be accessioned during this period arrived in the museum in 1903, and is a typical example of both the material collected from Sub-Saharan Africa during this time and the problems associated with it. Like the majority of Sub-Saharan textiles in the collection they originated in West Africa. The items were donated by a Miss Fletcher and it is noted, rather enigmatically, in the Central Inventory under General Remarks that, '1160 to 1170-1903. Collected by Miss Fletcher's brother who died on his way home some years ago.' Most of the items are listed as 'Made by the natives of the Niger River Settlements in West Africa' so it seems reasonable to assume that Miss Fletcher's brother had spent some time there, and perhaps was returning from there when he died. It is not made clear what Miss Fletcher's brother was doing in West Africa or how he died.

It is not unusual for material collected by a man to be donated to the V&A by a female relative following the man's death. This puts us at an additional remove from the textiles' origin and means that much valuable information about where exactly

things came from and how they were collected has been lost long before things reach the museum.

Nonetheless, from the enigmatic note in the Central Inventory it is possible to trace more files relating to this acquisition. The Central Inventory notes include a corresponding 'RP number' which refers to the Registered Papers associated with an object. These papers are usually catalogued in the form of a Nominal File. This is made in the name of any person who corresponds with the V&A. In this case the Nominal file is in the name of Miss Fletcher who donated these objects to the museum.

Miss Fletcher wrote to the V&A offering to donate the collection on 4 November 1902. A memo from A.B. Skinner shows the V&A taking a cautious approach towards the offer 'Please thank her...say that we fear they scarcely come within the scope of this museum, but before declining we should be glad of an opportunity of seeing them.' (VA: NA/1/F766) In January the following year Mr Trendell (a curator in the textiles department) visited Miss Fletcher to see the collection and made a list of twenty three objects which 'seemed interesting from a decorative point of view' (VA: NA/1/F766) and suggested they be brought to the museum for further inspection. This suggests that although the museum did not expect things from Africa to be of interest, if on viewing them they were found to be attractive or interesting they were happy to consider them. A week later the textiles were brought to the museum and it was agreed that fourteen objects were sufficiently interesting for the museum to accept. A note in the file reads: 'It was suggested that the remaining objects should be offered to the British Museum.' (VA: NA/1/F766) suggesting that



the British Museum was becoming the perceived natural home for African objects. However, all twenty three were officially accessioned. There is no information in the nominal file explaining this apparent change of mind.

Another way in which the gift from Miss Fletcher is typical in terms of Sub-Saharan textiles that came into the V&A at this time is that a significant proportion of the items she gave to the V&A are no longer in the collection. Miss Fletcher donated twenty four items to the museum of which twenty two were from West Africa. The objects that did not come from Africa were two pairs of shoes labelled 'Native American'; no further reference to them or explanation as to how Miss Fletcher, or her brother came to have them is in the correspondence. Eleven of the African objects went into the textile department; of these only three remain: 1166-1903, 1167-1903 and 1170-1903. There was also a selection of domestic items, two swords, a dagger and a knife that went into the Furniture and Woodwork department and Metalwork. None of the domestic items from either department remain but the various swords and knives do. The style of these knives reveals that they are variously Tuareg, Asante and Dahomeian.

Roughly half of the Fletcher collection that went to textiles was made up of domestic plaited grass and cane items, trays, fans and mats all listed as 'Made by the natives of the Niger River Settlements' V&A (1160-1903 to 1165-1903) and wanted by the museum 'as examples of native weaving' (VA: NA/1/F766 Memo 24/02/1903) reflecting the museum's interest in technique. The other objects referred to by Miss Fletcher in her original letter of November 4 1902 as 'specimens of Arab workmanship' (VA: NA/1/F766), were listed by the V&A as 'Made by the natives of

the Niger River Settlements' (VA/1160-1903 to 1165-1903) and commented under 'General Remarks' that they were 'said to have been worn by Arabs.' (VA/1166-1903 to 1171-1903) These were wanted for the V&A collection 'as an illustration of costume.' (VA: NA/1/F766) The Textiles Department at this time covered dress as well.

The three pieces donated by Miss Fletcher that remain in the collection are all from this second category and they appear to have been a man's complete outfit. They are made of blue and white narrow strip woven cotton cloth with a fine checked pattern. David Heathcote who has studied Hausa art, embroidery in particular, has written that 'The most common of the cloths made are a plain white variety and a speckled one made by weaving together Indigo and white, or light blue, threads.' (Heathcote 1976: 27) Holmes has written that this sort of weave is known as sabu among the Nupe (Lamb and Holmes 1980: 65), while Spring and Hudson refer to it as 'guineafowl design' (Spring and Hudson 2002: 69). Although Miss Fletcher believed these to have been made by Arab peoples this style of robe and the embroidery is strongly associated with the Hausa of Northern Nigeria. Nupe people also produced similar embroidery and were more likely to use patterned woven cloth such as this (Perani 1989). Both the Hausa and the Nupe are Muslim, which perhaps explains why Miss Fletcher believed them to be Arab. The Islamic element is crucial to understand the cultural meaning of these robes as John Picton and John Mack explain.

Embroidery is an art generally associated with the Islamic peoples of West Africa in the sense that embroidery has developed there within the context of Islamic culture. This is not to say that only Muslims wear embroidered clothing, which is certainly not true, although conformity to a fashion for Islamic dress must be counted among the factors promoting the Islamisation of West Africa. (Picton and Mack 1989:187)



Fig 5.1: Baban Riga, Embroidered Strip-Woven Cotton, Nigeria, 123 cm by 244 cm.  
V&A: 1166-1903

The central piece of the outfit is the V&A object 1166-1903 and is a robe decorated around the neck with embroidery. It is 244 cm wide and 123 cm long and is made up of narrow strip woven cotton. Each strip is about 5 cm wide and they are sewn together vertically to make the central part of the garment, and horizontally to form the sleeves. The strips are woven from white and indigo dyed blue cotton and would have been woven in a long narrow strip which would then have been cut to length and stitched together. The robe is decorated with white cotton embroidery. A robe like this is known as a baban riga.



Fig.5.2: Baban Riga, Embroidered Strip-Woven Cotton, Nigeria, 259 cm by 125 cm.  
V&A: T.699-1994

There is a second Riga in the V&A collection which is similar to this one, its number is T.699-1994. It is again made of blue and white narrow woven strips, a large pocket under the neck and decorated with embroidery around the neck, although the embroidery is done in green this time. There are other important differences too. The construction of this garment is considerably more complicated. Some of the strips used are 5 cm wide, like the ones in 1166-1903, but some are only 2.5 cm wide. Again the sleeves are made of strips sewn together horizontally. The main body of the garment is made of strips sewn together vertically, but this time more strips are added at approximately the same level as the pocket begins which gives an overall flared effect. It is also lined around the bottom hem with bright pink narrow strip-woven cotton. This is known as egbawo among the Nupe. Venice Lamb described seeing this in the 1970s and defined it as being ‘a strip of a variety of red shades...the main function of this material was for linings for the sleeves and hems of gowns.’ (Lamb 1980: 66) She also says that this fabric was based on egbah, a magenta silk woven in strips and was itself replaced with factory made cloth during the twentieth century.





Fig. 5.3: Lower Hem of Baban Riga, Embroidered Strip-Woven Cotton, Nigeria, V&A: T.699-1994

Unfortunately it is impossible to know who donated 699-1994 to the V&A or even when. A note on the file explains that it was ‘Found in the department following the Second World War and given the temporary number TN/1957/1.’ There is a second robe whose presence in the museum was also unexplained, it was given the temporary number TN/1951/5 and is now in the collection of Leeds Museum (LEEDM.F.1992.0004.0019). It is also of Hausa or Nupe origin and is similar in style to these robes but it is made of narrow white strips and the embroidery is also in white.

The embroidery on T.699-1994 and 1166-1903 is similar and is typically Hausa. Heathcote made a detailed study of this kind of embroidery in the 1970s and consequently it is one of the best documented types of West African embroidery. He explains the characteristics of Hausa embroidery as follows:

An important contribution to the evolution of a truly Hausa type of embroidery was made when two distinct types of pattern were brought

together. One of these consists principally of interlacing forms, and is essentially Oriental in character. The other is of angular and spiral shapes and is a more indigenous type of decoration commonly applied to a great deal of African ware such as pots, wooden food bowls and baskets. It is very likely that these two types of ornament were put together by Quranic scholars, some of whom draw out embroidery designs preparatory to their being sewn.  
(Heathcote 1976: 35)

Picton and Mack have pointed out that some of the patterns used in Hausa embroidery are very similar to zayanna patterns which are the designs drawn by Koranic scholars on a Koran board (Picton and Mack 1989: 190).



Fig. 5.4: Neck detail embroidery on Strip-Woven Cotton, Nigeria. V&A: 1166-1903



Fig. 5.5: Neck detail embroidery on Strip-Woven Cotton, Nigeria. V&A: T.699-1994

Both of these robes are decorated with a pattern known in Hausa as aska takwas or eight knives. Two 'knives' can be seen hanging from the base of the neck opening, a further three from the top of the alijhu (a large pocket that runs across from the neck opening) and the final three come out of the left side of the neck horizontally. Picton and Mack point out that this is the most common pattern so it is not surprising that both robes should have this design (Picton and Mack 1989: 190). Other named elements of the design that both robes share are 'five houses' which can be seen between the two sets of vertical knives and the band with the three chevrons at each end that delineates the area of pattern is known as gabiya and is characteristic of Nupe embroidery (Spring and Hudson 2002: 69). Both gowns also have a spiral to the right of the neck opening and on the back, typical of robes from Northern Nigeria (Spring and Hudson 2002: 69). The patterns are not exactly the same though. Heathcote has emphasised the fact that the designs do not have special meanings:

I have found no evidence of any elaborate symbolism in Hausa art. Though there is a great fondness among the artist for naming individual motifs, that fact that such names are not part of any complicated symbolic scheme is hardly surprising. Many traditional patterns are made up of material derived from various sources and worked into some sort of unity, and the names for the separate parts often appear to have been arrived at quite spontaneously.  
(Heathcote 1976: 11)

The embroidery also had a practical function. It served to strengthen the garment in the area it was likely to receive most stress, namely around the neck and pocket. A band known as a sharaba runs along one side and across the back of the neck and the embroidery patterns flow out from this. The embroidery also incorporates a linzani, a small triangular piece made of the same yarn as the embroidery and that fits into the

bottom right corner of the neck to strengthen it and support the pocket. The embroidery covers the pocket and is particularly dense across the top, which would receive most wear.

A great deal of work would have gone into making these robes and several men would have been involved in its making from start to finish, many of them specialising in specific tasks. For example, the linzani was often made by a man who worked solely on this part of the garment. The weaving would have been done by one man. The embroidery designs would then have been drawn, first onto the aljihu and then onto the rest of the robe. It is possible to see the reddish brown ink drawing on T.699-1994. The drawing of a complicated design can take up to two hours. The embroidery is again done on the aljihu first which is then sewn into position once the rest of the robe is completed. The person who draws the design does not do the actual embroidery which can take up to two months, and is again done by a man, or several men, who specialise in embroidery (Heathcote 1972: 17-19).

Heathcote has written that relatively few embroidery stitches are used but that button-hole stitch, curved and straight lines of chain stitch, honeycomb patterns and couching are typical (Heathcote 1972: 19). All of these can be seen in the embroidery on the two robes. The embroidery on T.699-1994 was described in *World Dress: Fashion in Detail*, a V&A publication first published in 2002, as follows:

The most easily discernible motifs are those decorated with massed eyelets, each small hole oversewn with silk to prevent fraying and producing a flat, pock marked surface. The horizontal band across the top of the pocket and the five daggers hanging from it are worked in pattern darning with the silk thread forming a flat pattern of small diamonds. This design is not immediately obvious but shows more clearly with the interplay of light in movement.  
(Crill, Weardon and Wilson 2009: 146)



Object 1166-1903 arrived in the museum with a pair of trousers (1167-1903) which were described in the inventory as ‘Trousers, composed of narrow hand woven strips of dark blue and white cotton stitched together, they are decorated above each knee with embroidery in light green cotton thread. Round the waist is a band of light blue calico.’ (Central Inventory 1166-1903). The decoration above the knee is only seen when the wearer is on a horse, on the ground it is covered by the robe (Picton and Mack 1989: 187). The patterns on the trousers are similar to those on the gown but have their own distinct style. Again this is typical for Hausa and Nupe embroidery, as is the use of different colours. Trousers are often embroidered in a wide range of colours unlike the robe which is monochromatic.

Although when the item arrived in the museum it was described as a ‘pair of trousers,’ it was later divided into three separate pieces each of which feature some embroidery. The original inventory records their condition as ‘torn’ which perhaps explains why they were cut up. The pieces that have been preserved are all embroidered which suggests that the focus of interest was the embroidery techniques used. In addition, a similar pair of trousers, given at the same time, were held in the museum until 1956 (Written off – VA: BOS 56/711) so as an example of costume they may have been extraneous to requirements.

The items donated by Miss Fletcher had a number of things in common with a gift from three years earlier by a Miss Meta Adams. Once again the gift was given by a woman in the name of her brother. On 8 January 1900 the museum received a parcel containing a West African costume and a letter on black rimmed mourning paper.

I send here with [sic] a robe & trousers, brought by my brother, Dr Coker Adams, from the Niger, which we wish to present to the museum. The work is entirely done by hand, weaving, dyeing & all, & the embroidery is the work of a Hausa woman & probably employed her for some years. It was given to my brother by a minor chief, & is most likely the work of one of his wives. The narrow strips in which the work is made are of that width because they are woven over the hand.  
Hoping you will care to have the garment as a specimen of needle work  
(VA: MA/1/A144)

Dr Coker Adams donated seventeen African artefacts, including four Nigerian textiles to the British Museum in 1900; it is not clear why this robe was given to the V&A by his sister instead. The final line of Miss Adams letter emphasised the idea of the garment as of interest as an example of needlework rather than as an example of clothing or having an anthropological or ethnographic interest. This might explain why this robe was seen as more suitable for the V&A, which had an interest in embroidery, and collected objects that demonstrated a technique. This is shown by a Memo on 12 January from AB Skinner of the textiles department to the Director of the museum. 'We should very much like to possess this robe & trousers as specimens of weaving, dyeing and embroidery from the Niger District. May we have sanction to accept with thanks?' (VA: MA/1/A144)

The other interesting thing about the letter from Miss Adams is the account of who made the clothing and the context of its production. The style of the embroidery, similar to that on the robe collected by Miss Fletcher's brother, on the Adams robe confirms her assertion that the items are probably Hausa. The Baban Riga did not necessarily belong to a chief but may well have been owned by somebody of importance. The more work that goes into a garment the more prestigious it is and the higher the status of the wearer or owner is likely to be. However, this robe would not

have been made by a woman or produced in the domestic setting she describes. Robes like this were generally worked on by several men carrying out specialised tasks (see above). It is not clear why Miss Adams thought that the robes would have been produced in a domestic setting by a woman rather than by professional men. Possibly she was reporting something she had been told or they may have been her own assumptions. Whoever made the assumptions seems to have projected onto Hausa society elements of nineteenth century British society. Embroidery was assumed to be a domestic and feminine activity.



Fig. 5.6: Men's Trousers, Strip woven cotton, Nigeria. V&A: 13a-1900

The V&A has three other embroidered robes from West Africa accessioned during this period. Until the temporary closure of the Textile Galleries for refurbishment there were only two textiles from Sub-Saharan Africa on display in the V&A. Both were embroidered robes from West Africa and both arrived in the museum between 1897 and 1924; they show two quite different styles of embroidery to those discussed above.



Fig. 5.7: Narrow strip woven Man's robe, West Africa Front. V&A: T.66-1913

T. 66-1913 is labelled as 'M, [male] embroidered cotton, 1800s, West African; Liberia' and was displayed in the V&A textile galleries as an example of the simplest form of garment construction. It arrived in the museum in 1913. Again it was donated by a woman, Mrs. Edith M. Hinchley who wrote to the museum on 26 February 1913.

The Director,  
V&A Musuem  
Dear Sir,

I have a few costumes from Morocco (just hand embroidered men's tunics and a saddlecloth -16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup>) century which might possibly be of interest for the museum – if your keeper of textiles would care to see them, I should be pleased to show them to him.

Also, a little old Siamese pot with lid. There are two corresponding pieces in the B.M. but I do not see any in the V.&A. Oriental Collection. I am not proposing to sell these things – but if they are not of sufficient distinction for the V&A museum to accept you might perhaps suggest a provincial museum which would be glad to have them.  
I am faithfully yours. Edith M. Hinchley  
(VA: MA/1/H2094)

Edith Hinchley seems to have had a long standing connection with the V&A. She had studied at the RCA and a letter from her to the museum in 1907 complains about the noise levels in the National Art Library (NAL) which is housed in the V&A. A handwritten note on the letter acknowledges that Hinchley was a regular visitor to the library and was known to the staff. Hinchley had first donated objects to the museum in 1911 and continued to offer gifts both to the museum and the NAL periodically until 1940. She also made donations to the British Museum.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The British Museum Quarterly, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Sep., 1929) p.56, British Museum, London.



Fig. 5.8: Narrow strip woven Man's robe, West Africa Back. V&A: T.66-1913

After some initial disagreement about which department should go and see Mrs. Hinchley's items and, all the departments arguing that they were too busy, Mr Trendell from the textiles department made an appointment to see the objects on 5 March. He made the following report:

I called on Mrs. Hinchley today, as arranged, and saw the costumes from Morocco. There are two square cut garments, with sleeves of hand-woven bluish cotton, [t.65,66-191 noted in margin] embroidered with geometrical and floral patterns (round the neck and on the front and sleeves) in coloured silk, wool, and white cotton. One striped robe is somewhat similar to the large North African Robe, 1110-1898, presented through Mr. Cunninghame Graham, but it is not quite as important. Both garments are in good condition. There is also a silk robe with green embroidery [T.67.1913 noted in margin]...All the objects offered are 19<sup>th</sup> century date; they would seem sufficiently interesting to consider for acceptance as gifts. ... If the objects are not accepted by us Mrs Hinchley proposes to offer them to provincial museums. P.B. Trendell "

(VA: MA/1/H2094)

Of the 'Moroccan' objects viewed only one is still believed to be Moroccan, and that is the silk robe with green embroidery (T.67-1913). It was decided on 7 May, after closer inspection at the museum, that the saddle cloth was Persian (T.68-1913). At a later date it was decided that T.65-1913 was from Palestine, while T.66-1913 is currently catalogued as Liberian. It is not clear from the museum records when or on what grounds these decisions were made. Possibly it was decided that the robe was Liberian after comparing it to two robes in the far more extensive British Museum collection. The robe is similar to two robes held at the British Museum (BM 2798 and BM 1934.3-7.218) which are said to have come from Liberia. However, in their discussion of these two robes in their book *African Textiles* Picton and Mack are careful to point out that these robes are said to have come from Liberia rather than to state conclusively that this is where embroidery of this type comes from.

Unfortunately the paucity of information about the origins of T.66-1913 makes it impossible for this robe to provide additional evidence about where this kind of robe may come from.

It is not clear why all of the objects were believed to be Moroccan. The official gift acceptance form, dated 7 March states 'They are all said to have come from Morocco, and are quite complete;' (V&A: MA/1/H2094). It was obviously Mrs Hinchley's belief that the robes were Moroccan but it is not clear why she thought this or whether she purchased the clothes there herself. Later correspondence with the museum reveals that Mrs Hinchley had lived with her husband in Bangkok and travelled in the Far East, but there is no evidence to suggest that she travelled in North Africa as well.



In 1923 a Nigerian textile of a type quite different to any already in the collection arrived in the V&A and was given the number T.230-1923. It was described as ‘Scarf, woven in cotton and dyed with indigo. Northern Nigeria (Munshi province); late 19<sup>th</sup> century.’ Munshi was the word used by the British and other ethnic groups in Nigeria such as the Hausa to describe the Tiv people who live in what is today known as Benue State in eastern Nigeria. (Duggan 1932: 173)



Fig. 5.9: Indigo dyed woven cotton. Tiv. Nigeria. 100 cm by 250 cm. V&A: T.230-1923

In the above image picture the warp of the cloth is vertical; the weft is done in small compacted sections leaving much of the warp exposed. The cloth has been resist dyed with indigo; the covered sections retain the natural colour of the cotton while the rest takes on the dark blue of the indigo. In the above image the cloth is only unfolded to half its full length due to lack of space available in the V&A store room on the day it was photographed, the pattern is symmetrical. A similar example exists in the British Museum and is numbered BM.1949.Af.46.240 (Gillow 2001: 61)



This was probably used as a woman's waist cloth. Paul and Laura Bohannon described a variety of cloths and their uses based on fieldwork conducted in the 1950s and 1960s including the following ones which may cover this example 'Gbagi is any cloth containing only blue and white... Ageigbela is a woman's waist cloth that alternates bands about four inches wide of loose and tight weave. Ashira is another cloth with loose weaving.' (Bohannon 1966: 292). Venice Lamb has written of her meeting with a Tiv weaver in 1970s that

the cloth with holes, or bands of warp only, was given by Mr Himpke [the weaver] a number of names, gbev wagh and ashisha being two which he produced with help of our museum photographs and his wife's memory. The major function of this cloth seemed to be as a kind of outer wrapper for women.  
(Holmes and Lamb 1980: 165)

The cloth in the V&A differs from the photographs Lamb refers to, which are of examples from Liverpool Museum, in that the warp in the other examples is longer and the cloths narrower. One of the examples is also decorated with cowrie shells. It is also important to remember that we cannot assume that Tiv cloths were the same in the early twentieth century as they were at the time of later writers.

Soon after this object arrived in the museum Tiv weaving went into decline. In his 1933 publication *The Tiv People* R. C. Abraham, the linguist and lexicographer wrote that '[t]he Tiv weave a great number of different cloths, but these are fast being ousted by materials bought at the European canteens and the time cannot be far away when weaving will become a thing of the past.' (Abraham 1933: 216-7)

The records relating to the accession of this object are no longer in the museum but some information from the donor copied into the museum's central inventory suggests that the process of replacing local cloth with European imports was already well under way ten years before Abraham wrote about it.

According to the donor these scarves, which constitute the only garment of the weavers, were made by an exceedingly primitive people, who grow and spin the cotton, weave the cloth and prepare the indigo themselves. As no similar arts are practised within hundreds of miles the origins of this work is obscure. The scarves are not made now as it is found that stuffs can be obtained more easily by purchase, with the proceeds from other kinds of labour. The same tribes are said to have – unlike nearly all the natives of Africa – a system of money closely resembling that of Europe.

(V&A: Central Inventory 11 November 1923 T.230-1923)

These notes also illuminates the complicated and contradictory views the British had towards African people: on the one hand they were 'exceedingly primitive' while on the other they had a monetary system similar to that which had developed in Europe. The acknowledgement of an apparently surprisingly sophisticated monetary system does not change the overall assessment of the Tiv as essentially primitive.

Incidentally, the monetary system of the Tiv would go on to be studied by the American anthropologists Paul and Laura Bohannon as a classic example of 'spheres of exchange' (L. and P. Bohannon 1968). Bohannon described the Tiv as having three separate spheres of exchange. The first consisted of locally produced food and other subsistence items. These are exchangeable for each other. The second was made up of white cloth, slaves, cattle and brass rods. The final 'sphere' was rights in human beings other than slaves. In practice this related to marriage. (Bohannon 1955: 61-3). It seems likely that it was the second sphere that the donor of this textile was referring

to when he said ‘a system of money most closely resembling that of Europe’ as cloths and brass rods were being used as currency.

### **Lady Kathleen Alexander**

Another set of interesting costumes arrived in the museum in 1923 from Lady Kathleen Alexander. A memo signed by Trendell and dated the 5 November 1923 reads

Kathleen, Lady Alexander sent her maid on Oct. 19<sup>th</sup> with 2 embroidered robes, a tapestry woven robe and an embroidered jacket, together with a roll of many unmounted photographs of architecture and native costumes, which she had collected during travels in the Near East – chiefly Palestine and Egypt...[more robes were delivered on 3 November] and they consisted of a striped robe, another with woven squares and a sleeveless coat....  
(V&A: MA/1/A335)

As a result of this delivery six costumes were accessioned by the textiles department (T.249-1923 to T.254-1923) and another by the India Section (352-1923). Included in this was T.249-1923 which was initially described as ‘1 Square robe, with stripes, tapestry woven,’ this description was later changed to ‘1 Striped robe, sleeveless, tapestry woven’ and is now described on CMS as ‘Tunic, Man’s from Mzab in Algeria woven by women during the winter months for their sons, tapestry woven 1850-1905.’

A second robe has also been attributed a North African origin. T.253-1923 was originally described as ‘1 Robe linen with woven squares and velvet,’ this was later changed to cotton and is now described as ‘Tunic, M., appliqué 1870-1890 Sudanese’.



Fig. 5.10: Tunic, M., appliqué 1870-1890 Sudanese V&A: T.253-1923

This sort of tunic is known as a jubba and is associated with the Mahdist revolt of the 1880s in Sudan. Several exist in the collections of European museums and the V&A purchased a second one during the 1960s. In 1881 Muhammad Ahmad, a teacher of the Sammaniyya sufi sect proclaimed himself Mahdi, a prophet of Islam. (Reid 2009: 109) The Mahdi and his followers began a jihad against Egyptian rule which had been established in the region in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and which they considered to be corrupt, immoral and divorced from the true principles of Islam. By 1885 they had overthrown the Egyptian government in Khartoum and set up their own state, killing the British General Gordon who was there to organise the withdrawal of the Egyptian population in the Sudan (Reid 2009: 108).

It is important to know a little of this history in order to understand the context for the development of the jubba. As Spring and Hudson explain:

The followers of the Mahdi were initially drawn from the darawish, literally ‘poor men’ or religious mendicants, of Kordofan and Darfur.

Many were clad in the ragged, patched tunics, *muraqqa'a*, which, for many centuries had been the dress of the Sufi initiates, and signified the rejection of material wealth in embracing the life-style of the religious ascetic.

(Spring and Hudson 1995: 100)

Although the *muraqqa'a* tunics are much rarer there is one in the British Museum. It is very different to the more stylised jubba, like the one in the V&A, where the patches, far from being the practical addition of an ascetic lifestyle have become an elaborate form of decoration. The patches on the jubba deliberately reference the *muraqqa'a* and the religious feeling associated with it, as does the crescent on the right breast and the shield shaped pocket on the left side which was designed to hold an amulet. The garment is the same on the back as it is on the front. Picton and Mack have suggested that the difference between the more stylised jubba and the rougher *muraqqa'a* might denote a difference in military rank of the wearer (Picton and Mack 1989:173). However, Spring and Hudson have argued 'Rather, it reflects a subtle, but fundamental, change in the ideology of the Mahdiyya.' They see the jubba as a sign of the development of 'a warrior caste, with unswerving and exclusive loyalty to the Mahdi and his successor.' They go on to argue that the introduction of the more formal 'uniform' style of the jubba helped to strengthen and centralise the Mahdist state by emphasising the power of the army and its loyalty to the Mahdi. (Spring and Hudson 1995: 101)

However, even within the centralised army of the Mahdi there were a variety of styles of jubba denoting ethnic affiliation and military rank, with the more senior officers wearing more elaborate examples. Spring and Hudson have identified two different types of jubba within the British Museum collection; those worn by the Baqqara Arabs who became the army's ruling elite and those worn by Red Sea Arabs who

fought in the Mahdi's army but retained an independent identity. The jubba in the V&A does not conform to either of these types. Most jubba are made of plain white or beige cotton with coloured patches applied. There is a second jubba in the V&A collection, purchased by the Circulation Department in 1967, which demonstrates this.



Fig. 5.11: Man's Jubba Sudan 19<sup>th</sup> Century V&A. Circ.563-1967

This jubba (Circ.563-1967) is made of a coarse cotton with patches of appliquéd wool in contrasting colours. The other interesting thing about this second jubba is its size it is only 95 cm by 125 cm suggesting that this was worn by a young man who was not fully grown. There is evidence that these tunics were worn by youths and even by children, for example the one in the British Museum (1945, Af.12.8).

On Circ.563-1967 each patch is of a single colour. In contrast the patches on jubba T.253-1923 are brightly coloured and have patterns woven into them. It has not been possible to find a comparable example to this jubba and it is unclear what these highly patterned patches might signify. Unfortunately the V&A records do not provide any useful clues about its origin and it has proved impossible to find more information about Kathleen, Lady Alexander who donated the jubba to the V&A.

In the V&A collection there is a drawing by British artist Frederick George entitled 'The Mahdi and his followers' which was made in 1886. The Mahdi had quite an impact of the popular British imagination. Neither the Mahdi nor his followers are dressed in jubba. The artist is not trying to create an accurate picture of the Mahdi's army; he is instead portraying a British idea of what an Islamic warrior would look like and has drawn them in stereotypically Arab dress.

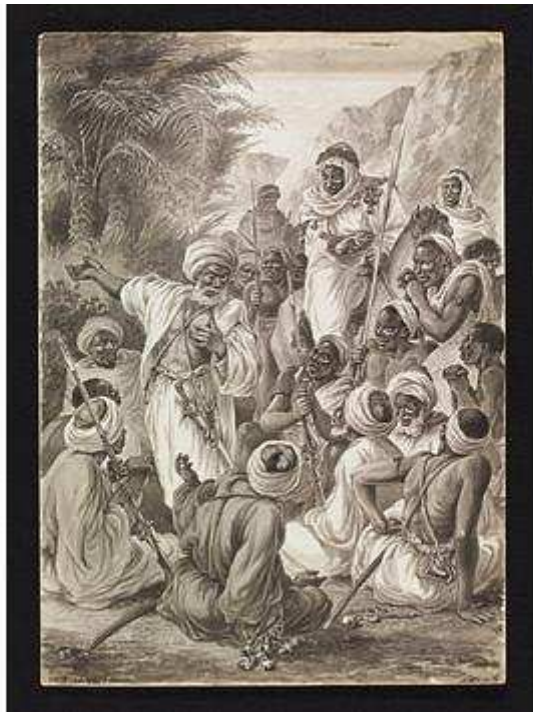


Fig. 5.12: George, Frederick (artist), Drawing, 1886 The Mahdi and his followers 35.7 x 25.5 cm V&A: SD.420

The V&A had earlier accessioned another robe associated with this particular conflict. In 1916 the V&A were given a costume they numbered T.200-1916, which is now in Leeds City Museum (LEEDM.F.1992.0004.0011). This sort of robe is known as a Qumbaz and is worn widely in the Middle East. It is a woven red silk robe with vertical yellow stripes which have geometric patterns in black, white and red on them. The robe has long sleeves and measures 141 cm across and 192 cm in length. It has three buttons down the front and is lined with white and maroon cotton. This type of robe was given to Arab chiefs in Egypt, particularly the Sudan. It was given to the V&A by Lady Watson, the widow of Colonel Sir Charles Watson (1844-1916) in the year of his death. Colonel Watson was in the Royal Engineers and served under General Gordon in the Sudan from 1874-1875 where he presumably acquired this robe.

### **Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham**

When deciding whether to accept the robe from Mrs Hinchley (T. 66-1913) for the V&A collection, AB Skinner wrote 'One striped robe is somewhat similar to the large North African Robe, 1110-1898, presented through Mr. Cunninghame Graham, but it is not quite as important.' (V&A: MA/1/H2094). The two robes are similar in shape and construction; they are both made of narrow strip-woven cotton cut into lengths and stitched together to form a simply constructed garment, but the style of embroidery which is clearly the focal point of these robes is quite different. Why did Skinner think the earlier robe was more important? The answer might lie in the issue of provenance. The robe arrived in the museum on 8 November 1898. It was given to the Museum by a Miss Una Taylor on behalf of Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham and was listed as '1 embroidered linen robe from Morocco (stained and torn)



on approval for presentation.’ (VA: MA/1/K808). The museum decided to accept the robe and wrote to Cunninghame Graham to thank him.

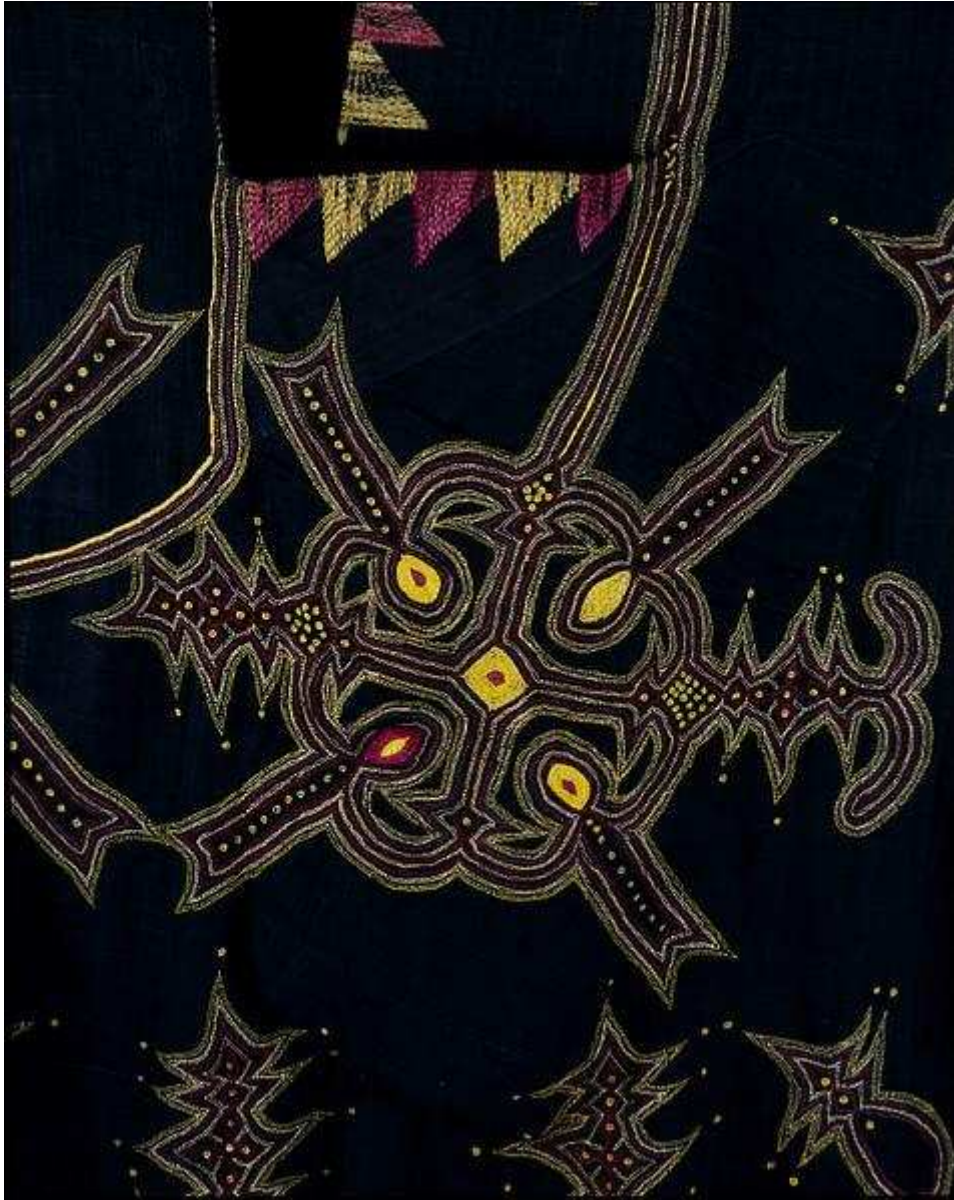


Fig. 5.13: Embroidery detail from around the neck of a boubou in the lomasa style. Silk on indigo dyed strip woven cotton. 185 cm by 135 cm V&A: 1110-1898



Fig. 5.14: Embroidery detail from around the neck of a boubou in the lomasa style. Silk on indigo dyed strip woven cotton. 185 cm by 135 cm V&A: 1110-1898

The robe is boubou in the lomasa style. These robes were usually made in Mali and worn across a large area of West Africa, extending up to North Africa. It is 180 cm long and 180 cm wide and made up of narrow woven strips, about 11cm wide. Nine strips have been stitched together vertically to form the main body of the robe and twelve strips have been arranged horizontally to create the sleeves. This kind of

narrow strip-weaving was common throughout West Africa and is often regarded as an archetypal feature of West African textile production (Picton and Mack 1989).

There is a large pocket opening at the base of the neck line and covering the wearer's left side. The robe has been dyed with indigo to a very dark blue, almost black.

When it was being made a garment like this would have been beaten until it took on a sheen; this shimmering effect would have been particularly effective under the very strong sun. The pattern on the front is asymmetric and is embroidered in pink and gold silk. The decoration is focussed around the neck and across the front pocket but covers the whole of the central section of the boubou both back and front. The embroidery, as well as being decorative had a practical function; it strengthens the areas that are likely to receive the most wear (Heathcote 1972<sup>2</sup>). The embroidery is done in a combination of buttonhole stitch and chain stitch. The chain stitch is interesting because from the front it appears as running stitch; it is only by looking at the back that it is revealed to be chain stitch. This means that most of the thread is on the inside and therefore invisible, which seems a wasteful use of the silk thread that would have been imported to the region and would have been valuable. The back is also embroidered but this time the pattern is symmetrical. A robe like this would have been made by several people performing different functions (weaving, drawing, embroidery) over a period of months. It would have been a prestigious and valuable object. The bottom of the robe has not been reinforced and is tattered as if from wear.

Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham, who sent this robe to the V&A, was born into an aristocratic Scottish Family. During his life he was a politician, author, journalist

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<sup>2</sup> Heathcote is writing about Hausa robes which differ in decorative style to this type of robe but the same structural considerations apply.

and adventurer. He travelled widely and spent many years in Argentina where he died in 1936. He was initially a Liberal Party MP and the first ever member of the British Parliament to refer to himself as a socialist. He went on to become a founder member of both the Scottish Labour Party and the National Party of Scotland; and was made the first president of the Scottish National Party in 1934. Although he had been largely forgotten, in recent years his reputation has been on the rise again. This began with the publication in 2004 of a biography by his great niece (Cunninghame Graham 2004) and was followed a year later by a second biography *The People's Laird: A Life of Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham* (Taylor 2005). In 2008 BBC Scotland broadcast a programme about his life called *The Adventures of Don Roberto*.

After the boubou was accepted by the museum, the V&A wrote to Cunninghame Graham to thank him for his gift. He replied explaining that the gift was not, in fact, from him:

I do not wish that the embroidered robe be given in my name but in that of Najib Kisbany Esq. who had it from an Arab chief Bashir el-Beiruc in the desert between Cape Juby and Sageit-el-Hamara. The robe was made and embroidered in the country and Mr Kisbany believes there is not another in existence with the exception of one in a museum in America (Philadelphia) I think.  
(VA: MA/1/K808)

Najib Kisbany and Cunninghame Graham were business partners who wished to set up a trading company in North Africa. In A Memorandum Explanatory of Proposals for the trading company written in September 1899 Kisbany was described as

a Syrian ... a thoroughly educated man who speaks and writes English fluently, and who is of course equally conversant with Arabic, his native language. Mr Kisbany has co-operated with Mr Cunninghame Graham in the negotiations with the Arab Chief.

(National Library of Scotland: Inventory Acc.11335/64)

Kisbany also seems to have been seen as something of an expert on Morocco. The same memo says ‘Among those familiar with the politics and the relationships of this somewhat mysterious country is a ... Mr Najib Kisbany’.

The two men had hoped to set up a trading company in an area they referred to as Tiris and defined as extending ‘from Cape Bojador in the north to Rio de Oro in the south and runs eastward from the Atlantic for hundreds of miles, into unknown boundaries or limits.’



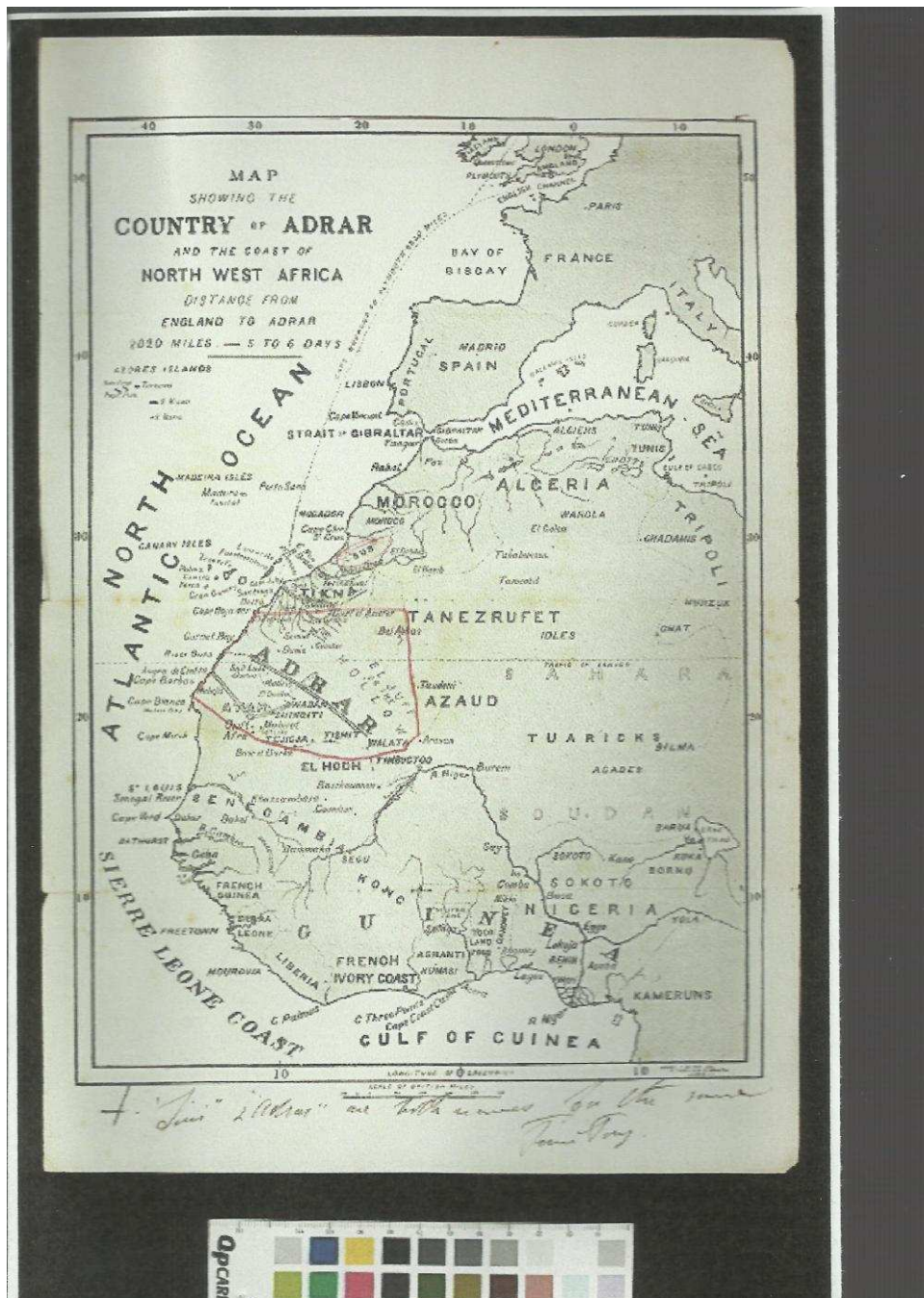


Fig. 5.15: Map of the 'County of Adrar' National Library of Scotland: Inventory Acc.11335/64)

This area covers the coastal region of Western Sahara which had been made a Spanish protectorate at the conference of Berlin in 1884. The unknown limits of the region to the east meant that the territory would probably also include parts of French West Africa. In a 'Report on the Tiris District' that Najib Kisbany wrote to encourage support for the venture from European Governments and potential investors, he explained the need for and advantages of a port on the coast of Western Sahara.

A glance on the map will at once reveal the suitability and importance of its situation, both in its nearness to Europe and in its fitness to be a door of trade to the interior districts of the Sahara, and the western Soudan; - to say nothing of the rich but closed up districts of Sus that lie right close to it... It takes only six or seven days' sail from England to reach it, and from the Canaries (which will serve as a convenient base for operations) a day and a half. Its fitness as a door of entry, for the development of trade with the Sahara and the surrounding countries is of no less consequence. Take the whole desert at large, and you will find it has no other outlet to the sea which is near England except this western corner, and when you bear in mind that that long stretch of coast from Mogador down to St Louis – Senegal, has not one single port to receive the trade of the wide country that lies behind it you will soon realise the advantage of such a contemplation.

(National Library of Scotland: Inventory Acc.11335/64)

By opening up a trading port in the Western Sahara and with the trading rights to the region a company would be able to control both the export of raw materials from the area and the import of manufactured goods, all the while circumventing French or Moroccan tariffs. It was potentially a very lucrative plan but also one that had the potential to upset the delicate balance of power in the region.

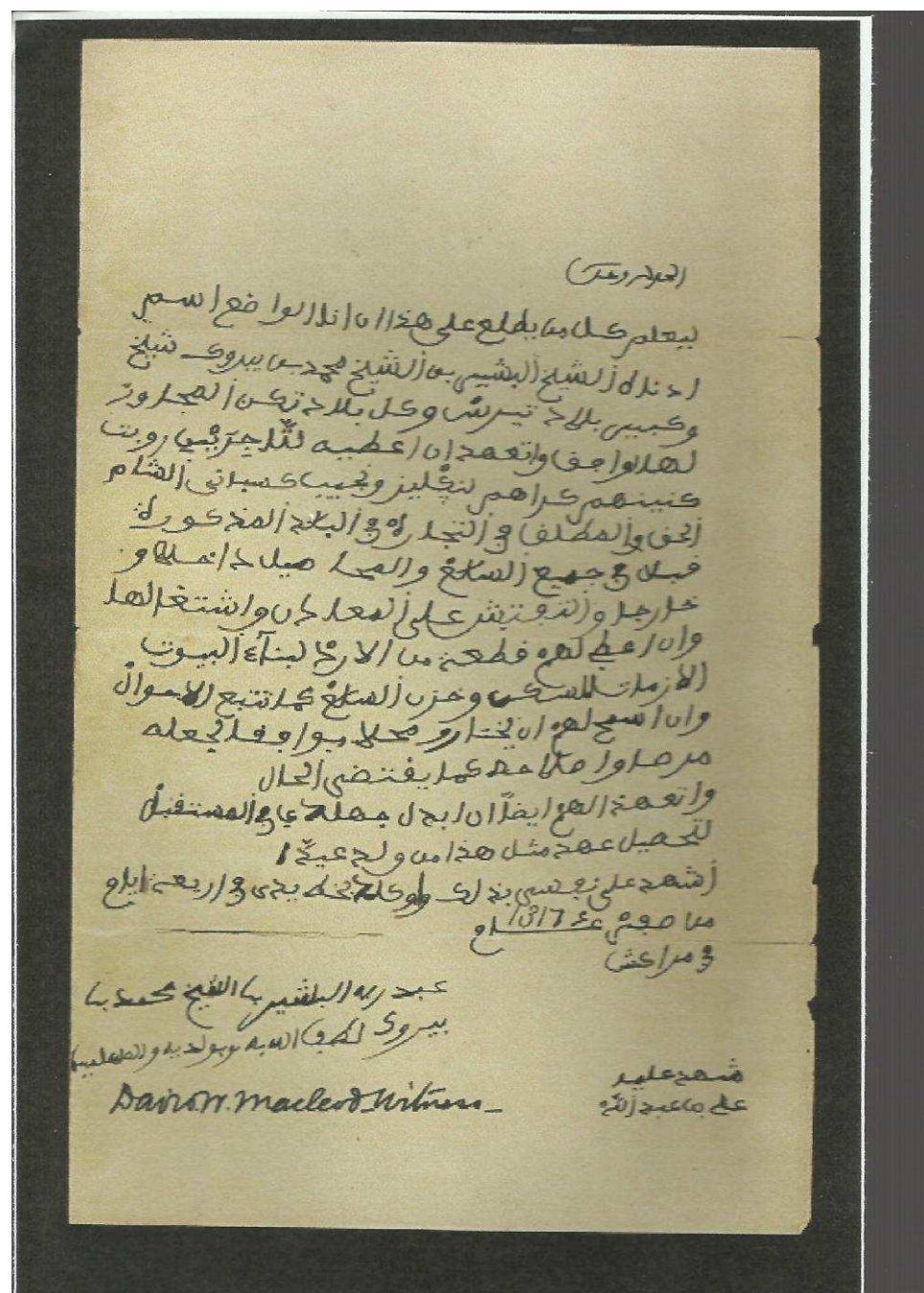


Fig. 5.16: Trade Treaty for the 'County of Adrar' National Library of Scotland: Inventory Acc.11335/64



Copies of the treaty, in both Arabic and English are held in the Cunnighame Graham family archive at the National Library of Scotland, the following translation is taken from there.

PRAISE BE TO GOD ALONE.

Let it be known to the reader of this that I the undersigned, Sheikh el-Bashir Ben Sheikh Mohammed Ben Beyrouk, chief and headman of Tiris and all the surrounding district do hereby agree and covenant to give to Messrs (Tagirs) Robert Cunningham (sic) Graham, the Englishman, and Najib Kissany, the Syrian, the exclusive right of trading in the above mentioned Country in all kinds of goods and products both import and export and of searching for and working minerals.

I also covenant to give them a piece of ground on which to erect houses and stores for both living and trading purposes as the case may require and to allow them to select a suitable place for a harbour and erect all requisite improvements as may be needed.

I also promise to do my best in the future to obtain for them a similar treaty from Wold-Ay-idda.

I hereby certify this and ensure it by my handwriting in the fourth of Safar, year 1317. Morocco City.

(Signed) Slave of His Lord  
El-Bashir Ben Sheikh Mohammed Ben Beyrouk, May god preserve him,  
His parents and all true Musselmans.

Witness

Ali Ben Abdallah

David M. Macleod.

(National Library of Scotland: Inventory Acc.11335/64)

Notes in the same file explain that Wold-ay-idda is 'El Bashir's father in law and is a powerful chief in the south' and that David M. Macleod 'is a Merchant in Sangia and well known there.' (National Library of Scotland: Inventory Acc.11335/64)

In a letter to his mother written in 1896, while Cunninghame Graham was staying at the Palm Tree House Sanatorium Mogador Morocco he describes a meeting with Bashir-el-Beiruc.

[I] should not have to go to Cape Juby to meet the Chief as he came to see me in Morocco City. I have made a treaty with him – a full concession to trade, and what may come out of it no-one knows (not even Allah). The chief is Bashir-el-Beiruc, [a] man of a very old family, and he has written me several letters ... and has been wishing ... to see more trade established in his country... if I refuse this concession he will take it to some one else.

(National Library of Scotland: Inventory Acc.11335/62)

It is perhaps surprising that Cunninghame Graham was interested in running a trading company in the region. In *Mogreb-el-acksa*, an account of his travels in Morocco, he had written disparagingly about European traders in the area, questioning the benefits they brought to the people. 'Guns, gin, powder, and shoddy cloths, dishonest dealing only too frequently, and flimsy manufactures which displace the fabrics woven by the women, new ways and discontent with what they know ... these are the blessings Europeans take to Eastern lands.' (Cunninghame Graham 1898) Bashir-el-Beiruc's own desire to open the area he controlled to trade seems to have been important in justifying Cunninghame Graham's decision to pursue the trading company.

There is very little reference made in the Cunninghame Graham files in the National library of Scotland to Bashir-el-Beiruc, which deal mostly with the problems that occurred after they were granted the concession by him. In a document entitled *Tiris* Notes written by Cunninghame Graham in 1899 he does provide a few more details about Bashir-el-Beiruc.

I found him an Arab of the highest class, cultivated in all the learning of his people, speaking a little Spanish and a few words of English, and having an accurate perception of the relative importance of the chief European nations. A long and intricate correspondence with him resulted

in his incurring some personal risk in meeting me and in the signing of the appended concession or 'treaty.' He on his part naturally expects some advantages from any one exploiting his territory.  
(National Library of Scotland: Inventory Acc.11335/64)

However, getting the concession from Bashir-el-Beiruc was only the beginning of Kisbany and Cunninghame Graham's problems and their plan for a trading company in Tiris never bore fruit. Kisbany, who had remained in Morocco when Cunninghame Graham returned to Scotland, summed up the problem in a letter dated 23 February 1899 'it seems to me that the real difficulty lies more in the obtaining of a permission from the Spanish Government ... For after all what could be the use of the friendship of chiefs or the concession to work a district if you can't find a door to get to it.'  
(National Library of Scotland: Inventory Acc.11335/64).

The entire coast in the area was controlled by either the Spanish or the Moroccans. Kisbany and Cunninghame Graham felt that the rights of both the Spanish and the Moroccans to claim control of these regions were questionable and hoped to persuade the British government that this was the case and to win their support for their scheme. In an undated draft of a letter to the Right Honourable Sir John Broderick MP requesting his support for the scheme, Cunninghame Graham explained the situation in the region as he saw it:

No Sultan of Morocco has ever had any suzerainty either real or assumed below Cape Noun, still less in the districts of Tiris and Adrar, although the British Government has recognised his frontier as extending to Cape Bojador.

It may of course be argued that the Spaniards are settled at Rio De Oro. They have indeed about a hundred men there, but they have almost no relations with the interior and Bashir has informed me that neither he nor his father ever had any dealings with them or intended to do so.

Under no circumstances therefore can the Spanish occupation at the above mentioned point be considered “real and effective” that occupation should be “real and effective” is one of the contentions of the British Government in the Venezuela arbitration.

As to the French frontiers to the south of the Tiris district I am uncertain of its exact whereabouts, but as far as I have been able to make out it must be far distant from it. It will be at once apparent that a settlement in the Tiris District would constitute not only an important trade centre but would also tend very largely to extend British influence in those regions. (National Library of Scotland: Inventory Acc.11335/64)

However, the British Government were not to be persuaded. A letter from the Foreign Office to Cunningham Graham dated 10 August 1899 reveals that they were not willing to question the boundaries that had been established between the European powers in North West Africa

Sir:-

I am directed by the Marquess of Salisbury to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of the 29<sup>th</sup> ultimo, inclosing a copy of a Treaty signed by Bashir-el-Barue and inquiring what the attitude of Her Majesty's government would be towards the establishment of a trading enterprise in the Tiris district in accordance with the terms of that Treaty.

In reply I am to inform you that the Coast from Cape Blanco to Cape Bojador has been declared by the Spanish government to be a Spanish Protectorate, and that Her Majesty's Government cannot undertake to question their jurisdiction there.

I am, sir, your most humble servant.

Sanderson

(National Library of Scotland: Inventory Acc.11335/64)

Despite being a little frustrated at the attitude of the British Government towards their proposed trading company they do not seem to be particularly surprised or down cast by it. They remain confident in the trading company and convinced of their ability to negotiate with the Spanish Government. The Memorandum Explanatory of Proposals for Exploration and Development of the District of Tiris or Adrar in North Africa dated September 1899 ends on an upbeat note.

It remains only to add that Mr Cunninghame Graham has the best reason to believe that the Spanish Government will receive with special favour any suggestions which come from him; and the Ambassador of Spain at Tangier to whom the Spanish Government has committed this matter, has indicated the most friendly disposition towards Mr Cunninghame Graham and a keen interest in this enterprise.

(National Library of Scotland: Inventory Acc.11335/64)

It is unclear from the archive what the purpose of this document was and it might have been used to attract potential investors or supporters for the trading company. It could therefore be expected to take an upbeat tone but might be overly optimistic. However, Cunninghame Graham had a Spanish grandmother, spoke Spanish as his first language and was on good terms with the Spanish Ambassador in Tangier. Ultimately, however, the success or failure of the trading company did not depend on relationships in North Africa but on politics in Europe. The Spanish government was unlikely to support a British trading company. A letter dated 25 June 1903 from A. Clarke who was acting on behalf of Kisbany and Cunninghame Graham in Madrid explained the reasons for this.

I confirm my letter of Monday, and I have to-day had a long and friendly conversation with the Ministro de Estado, the practical result of which, however, I regret to say is nil ... He repeated, however, what he told us when we saw him together that nothing could be seriously entertained until the matter had been brought before the Cortes, and of this there is certainly no chance during the present session, which probably is just as well, because the proposal would unquestionably raise a howl of opposition from the press, who will pretend that this is the thin end of the wedge for the Great Britain to obtain possession of the Canary Islands. It is to be hoped that later this or some future Government will be stronger than they are at present to resist the opposition which inevitably will be raised.

(National Library of Scotland: Inventory Acc.11335/64)

Although Cunninghame Graham and Kisbany try again to persuade the Spanish Government to grant them a trading concession the following year it does not materialize. Kisbany had already left Morocco for America suggesting that he had

lost hope in the project and at this point the letters and papers relating to it in the archive end.

Although this type of '*lomas*a' robe is rare they are not as unusual as Cunninghame Graham's letter to the V&A implies and Bernhard Gardi has located seventeen similar robes in the collections of other European museums. Five of them were acquired before this one was given to the V&A and one of them was already in the V&A. (Gardi 2000: 202). A memo from AB Skinner to Mr. Clarke dated 10 November 1898 (before the museum knew the full details of the robe's provenance) states 'We have nothing like this robe in the museum and should be glad to accept it from Mr Cunninghame Graham.' However, the museum did have a similar robe in its collection. In 1890 the first West African robe was accessioned into the museum (266-1890). It was also a '*lomas*a' robe, like the robe Najib Kisbany gave. The earlier boubou is slightly smaller, at 165cm wide and 122cm long, the central part of the robe is made of five vertical strips and the sleeves of seven horizontal ones. It is decorated with pink and yellow embroidery which is again arranged around the neck, across the front pocket and down the back. The bottom is uneven and tattered. It is perhaps the most intriguing and enigmatic of all the sub-Saharan African textiles accessioned during this period.



Fig. 5.17: Boubou in the lomasa style 165 x 122cm Front View V&A: 266-1890



Fig. 5.18: Boubou in the lomasa style 165 x 122cm back view V&A: 266-1890

Although this robe was not accessioned until 1890 the following note, taken from the museum's Central Inventory, shows that it had arrived at the museum some fifteen years earlier in 1875.

Robe of a chief. Blue cotton, worked in coloured silks round the neck and down the front and back with an angular pattern and corded spirals; it is further decorated with holes cut and sewn round with silk. From the Gambia River. / African. L. 4ft. W. 5ft 4 1/2in. / 21 Oct 1875 / Given by Mrs Foy, 28 Aden Grove, North. See R.P. 3441/1875, 3245/1875.

Unfortunately there are no other papers relating to this object in the V&A archive.

The Central Inventory (quoted above) makes reference to some Registered Papers but they have been destroyed. It is not possible to tell when this happened. It is clear from comparison with similar robes in other museum collections that this robe was probably made in present day Mali. It probably travelled from Mali to the West African coast along the Gambia River which was one of the main trading routes into the West African interior during the nineteenth century. Many European countries maintained forts along the river to protect their trade interests.

It seems to have arrived in the museum with another object, a wooden staff listed as 'African c1850 ex. Sandili, Chief of Gaika tribe.' This seems to be a reference to King Sandile, chief of the Ngikas from 1820 until 1878 when he was killed during the ninth Xhosa war, also known as the wars of the Eastern Cape. What is interesting about this is the distance between where the robe was made in West Africa and where the staff originated, in the Southernmost part of Africa. The only likely connection between these two objects is the person who collected them. The staff appears to have arrived in the museum before the death of King Sandile, but he had established contact with the British through the Xhosa wars, particularly during the seventh



Xhosa war when King Sandile was arrested and imprisoned after entering a British camp to seek terms in 1846.

This robe was one of only two Sub-Saharan African robes which were displayed in the textiles gallery before their closure for refurbishment in 2011. It was hung in one of the textile galleries in a case which showed simply constructed garments. It hung alongside T.66-1913 which is described as the simplest form of garment construction. This one is slightly more complex because of the 'sleeves.' The display caption read (08/04/2010):

WEST AFRICA, probably from the Gambia, mid 19<sup>th</sup> century.  
Only a careful examination of the garment reveals its complexity; seams which are almost invisible join together cotton fabric which is only 11 cms wide; five pieces are used to form the central pattern and seventeen are used for each sleeve.

The embroidery is worked with floss silk in satin and chain stitches with eyelet holes and with applied silk and cotton cord.

Given by Mrs Foy

The garment that followed it in the case is a Palestinian robe, the one from Mrs Hinchley that was originally believed to be Moroccan.

### **J. J. Monteiro and the Quissama**

The large number of textiles that have been removed from the V&A collection can skew our understanding of the collection. For example, by looking at the textiles currently in the museum it appears that the V&A did not collect anything from south of the equator during this period, and barely anything from southern or central Africa at any time of its history. This picture is a little misleading; most of the textiles from Sub-Saharan Africa do come from West Africa but occasionally significant

acquisitions from further south found their way into the museum. In 1899 the V&A accessioned two items from Angola (239-1899 and 240-1899). 240-1899 is described in the Central Inventory as ‘Short skirt, composed of twisted strands of salmon-coloured vegetable fibre (the inner bark of the baobab tree), bond together with cord at the top. Worn by young women of the Quissama [Kissama] tribe to Angola, West Africa.’ 239-1899 has exactly the same description except that the words ‘salmon coloured’ have been crossed out and replaced with ‘light brown’. It is also noted under General Remarks that both skirts were ‘Collected in the neighbourhood of Delagoa Bay by the late J. J. Monteiro and his wife.’

There had been Portuguese involvement in Angola since the fifteenth century when trading posts were set up along the Angolan coast because it was on the trade route between Europe and India. Portuguese presence increased during the seventeenth and eighteenth century as an economy began to develop around the trade of raw materials and slaves, destined for Portugal’s new world colonies. However, Portuguese influence was limited to the coastal region and it was not until the late nineteenth century that an interest in developing the region’s hinterland grew up. This period saw investment in mining, railways and agriculture by both British and Portuguese individuals.

J. J. Monteiro seems to have been part of this process. On 27 April 1875 J. J. Monteiro gave a talk entitled ‘*On the Quissama Tribe of Angola*’ to the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain. He is listed in their journal as an ‘Associate of the Royal School of Mines’. Monteiro’s talk offers a rare opportunity to read descriptions of, and opinions about, the people who made objects by those who

collected them and provides an insight into why they collected them. Monteiro used two skirts made by the Kissama people as visual aids during this talk; it is possible that these are the objects that ended up in the V&A collection.

Monteiro says that he first encountered the Kissama in 1859 and that their territory stretched along the south bank of the Cuanza River from its mouth near Luanda and describes how heavy the trade was along the river. He states 'Of the many tribes of negroes in Angola, that of the Quissama is, perhaps, the lowest type, both physically and mentally.' (Monteiro 1876: 199). Monteiro compares them unfavourably with the tribes of the Northern Bank who have been more susceptible to the 'good influence' of the missionaries.

Were not the Quissamas such an intractable race, the result of the former missionary teaching and civilisation would likewise be apparent in them; there can be no reason for supposing they were neglected or not included in the labours of the missionaries, and it can only have been their great incapacity to receive instruction that has left them the savage and untamed tribe that we still find them, after 300 years of constant intercourse with the white race. When I say savage, I do not mean ferocious or warlike; they are the very reverse, being most cowardly and distrustful.  
(Monteiro 1876: 199)

Despite the disdain and racial slurs that dominate the piece, it is possible to glean some information about the Kissama that contradicts Monteiro's own assessment of them. He described how they made water cisterns out of hollowed baobab trees in order to deal with the arid climate and also how 'the white traders at Dondo go, in the proper season, to the principal king of the Quissamas to settle the price at which it [the palm oil] is to be bartered.' (Monteiro 1876:199). This implies that to some degree the Kissama are able to influence the flow of trade along the river, perhaps suggesting a reason for Monteiro's apparent dislike of them. He also appears to be annoyed by the Kissama's independence: 'they constantly cross over [the river] to sell or barter to

the white traders and the more civilised natives on the north bank; but they are such a suspicious and distrustful race that they never delay longer than necessary.’ (Monteiro 1876:199). Monteiro goes on to comment that ‘They will not allow whites or blacks to open stores for trade in their country, nor will they deliver up slaves who run away into the country from their masters on the North Bank.’ (Monteiro 1876:199).

During his talk Monteiro showed two dresses to his audience. ‘The larger dress is that of a full-grown woman, the smaller, one of a young woman, girls and children do not wearing any clothing at all.’ We cannot be certain whether or not these dresses are the ones that come to the Museum following Monteiro’s death, but it seems likely given the size differential described in the Central Inventory that says one of the skirts was seventeen inches long and two foot ten and a half inches wide and the other one only thirteen inches long and two foot two and a half inches wide.

Monteiro also describes the clothing worn by the Kissama and uses the opportunity to denigrate them again.

The Quissamas are a miserably poor and wretched tribe – are small and dirty in their persons and scanty clothing. The women wear only a kind of short skirt made of the inner bark of the baobab tree, and fastened round the loins...The skirt seldom reaches right round the body, part of the thigh being left exposed. With use, the skirt splits up into a bundle of strings, and gets black with filth, perspiration and grease. The two dresses exhibited I had to order to be made, as it was impossible to keep and I could get second-hand. The women in walking or running give a peculiar rotary and up and down motion to these skirts, and, not satisfied with Nature’s liberality, attempt to improve on her by the addition of several extra layers of fibre on that part of the skirt which falls behind.  
(Monteiro 1876:199)

Given his description of the Kissama, their way of life and their clothing, it is clear that Monteiro did not collect these skirts because he was impressed by the Kissama in

any way or valued their material culture. So why did Monteiro collect these dresses? Possibly to be used in talks like the one we know he gave to the Royal Anthropological Institute. Monteiro may have felt it his duty to bring back whatever information he could about a region that was still very remote and largely unexplored. We know he also collected botanical samples for John Dalton Hooker and Kew Gardens while he was in Angola, information about the Kissama could have been collected in the same spirit. What it does show is the range of different European interests and activities in Africa during this period.

### **Summary**

Between 1897 and 1924 the V&A collected more textiles from Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly West Africa than it had previously. This was due to increasing British involvement in Africa both before and during this period which meant that more British people had textiles to sell or give to the museum. These textiles reflect, to some extent, the diversity of regions and different interests that Britain was involved in Africa but come mainly from West Africa. Many of these textiles are no longer in the collection. Studying the donors and reaction to these textiles in the museum reveals the often contradictory views held about African people at this time. There is little evidence to suggest that the museum was deliberately excluding textiles from Africa during this period although they were not one of its main interests. They accessioned pieces that demonstrated interesting techniques or decorative patterns not found elsewhere in the collection.

## **Chapter 6: 1924-1939 Collection and Disposal**

This era represents both the period when the Textiles Department was most active in collecting material from Africa and also the time when African textiles already in the collection began to be systematically removed. We see most clearly in these two processes the cementing of the division between North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa. While North African textiles were increasingly collected, objects from further south are no longer seen as part of the department's collecting remit.

### **6.1 Morocco and the Textile Department in the 1920s**

Although the V&A had continued to acquire textiles from North Africa under Kendrick, it was in the 1920s that the V&A began to collect them more systematically and in greater numbers. In fact, the 1920s represents the most active period for collecting textiles from the African continent (apart from pieces from Egypt) by the V&A. Of the 481 North African textiles in the V&A's collection, 151 of them were collected during this decade, the vast majority of these textiles were embroideries from Morocco. This increased interest in Moroccan textiles is due to the appointment in 1924 of Alan John Bayard Wace (1879–1957) to the position of Deputy Keeper of Textiles; he remained at the museum until 1934 (ODNB). Wace was able to build on the groundwork laid by Kendrick and the relationship between the two men is interesting. However, the role of Wace in the development of this aspect of the collection shows clearly the degree to which an individual within the institution could affect the make up of the museum's collection.

Wace was best known as an archaeologist and was heavily involved in excavations of Greece, most notably Mycenae. While in Greece he developed an interest in, and was a noted collector of, Greek embroideries. In 1914 he was appointed Director of the

British School at Athens where he stayed until 1923 (ODNB). While at the British School he and his colleague R.M. Dawkins (1870-1955) both amassed significant collections of Greek embroideries. They collected over 1200 pieces between the two of them (French 2009: 77). Dawkins collection of nearly 700 embroideries was given to the V&A in 1949 and accessioned in 1950; it included eighteen pieces from Morocco (V&A: MA/1/D513). Wace's own collection is divided between the V&A, Liverpool Museums and the Textile Museum, Washington DC.

Wace's involvement with the V&A predates his appointment; in 1919 he had donated 84 pieces of Greek embroidery to the museum (V&A: MA1/W2). However, Ann French, who is researching her PhD about the personal collections of Wace and Dawkins, has pointed out that Wace's involvement with the V&A goes back several years before this donation, for example loans from Wace were on display in the museum during the World War One (French 2009: 87). Wace began a correspondence with A.F. Kendrick in 1906 following a meeting as a minute to Eric Maclagan (Director of the V&A) dated 30 June shows.

I saw him [Wace] when he was in London some time ago and we looked through the very excellent collection of ... embroideries in the museum. The collection has never been satisfactorily classified as the literature on the subject is very scanty, and the work could only be done by a person of experience in the localities where the embroideries are found ... Mr Wace was greatly interested in some of our fine pieces in the museum, and before leaving he suggested an exchange of photographs for mutual assistance in the work of classification.  
(V&A: MA/1/W2)

Wace and Kendrick were to have a long and fruitful working relationship that would lead eventually to Wace becoming Keeper of Textiles at the V&A on Kendrick's retirement from that post.

There seems to have been an understanding with the V&A that Wace's collection would eventually come to the V&A, as a note to the Director from Kendrick dated 28 July 1924 shows.

We have been aware for some time that Mr. R. M. Dawkins of Plas Dulas, Llanddulas, North Wales, intended to bequeath to the Museum his collection of embroideries brought together by him in the Greek Islands. I have lately heard from a friend of his and ours that a provision to that effect is already made in Mr Dawkin's will. With our own collection and Mr. Wace's (which comes to us unless unforeseen circumstances should arise) we should have by a long way the finest collection in the world, and such as could never be got together again.  
(V&A: MA/1/D513)

Unfortunately unforeseen circumstances did intervene and in 1924 Wace sold a portion of his collection to G.H. Myers, founder of the Textile Museum, Washington D.C. The remainder of the collection was sold to Liverpool Museums in 1957 (French 2009: 88-89).

Following Wace's death in 1957 Wingfield Digby (Keeper of the Department of Textiles 1947-1972) wrote to The Times to highlight the importance of Wace's contribution to the collection and study of embroidery, and how important his own collection had been in developing this interest.

He was one of the earliest collectors of Greek Island embroideries (with his colleague of the British School at Athens, Professor Dawkins) and this was his original interest in textiles. He was an acknowledged authority on Greek Island embroideries and he formed the museum's unrivalled collection of Mediterranean embroideries ... In his study of embroideries he paid special attention to the classification of stitches and it is due to him that no museum label is now considered accurate unless it identifies the class of stitches used.  
(Wingfield Digby 1957)



French has studied the methods and motivations behind Wace's personal collecting and provides important insights that are very useful for understanding Wace's interest in Moroccan embroideries during his time as Keeper of the Textile Collection. She suggests that Wace and Dawkins were:

both influenced by senior academics including Sir William Ridgeway, Disney Professor of Archaeology at Cambridge 1892-1926, and J.L. Myres, Wykeham Professor of Ancient History at Oxford 1910-39, both of whom were active in promoting anthropology as an academic discipline...Although Ridgeway supported and encouraged his pupils in non-archaeological and more 'ethnographical work', J.L. Myres seems to have initiated the particular interest in embroidery.  
(French 2009: 80-81)

The influence of a more ethnographic method helps to account for some of the embroidery collecting done under Wace. He seems keen to collect relatively modest or everyday pieces and examples of every type in order to create a complete picture of how the art was practised within the society.

### **Acquisition**

The acquisition papers dealing with the arrival of particular textiles in the museum are useful for providing an insight into the reasons the Textiles Department, and Wace in particular, felt it important that they should collect Moroccan textiles at this time. The purchase in 1928 of a collection of textiles from a Mrs Black-Hawkins is an example of this. On 9 November 1928 fourteen Moroccan embroideries arrive at the museum for inspection to see if they are suitable for the collection. Eight of the pieces are found to be suitable for the Textiles Department (T.2-1928 to T.7-1928 with two pieces being listed under the number T.6-1928), a further three go to Circulation and the remaining three are returned to their owner (V&A: MA/1/B1545). They represent a number of different embroidery styles that can be found in Morocco and are associated with specific towns such as Meknes, Rabat or Fez.

Wace was keen to add some of these to the collection, as he explained in a note to the Director of the museum dated 7 January 1928.

Mrs Black-Hawkins lives in Morocco and collects embroideries and other Moorish work. These embroideries are all picked specimens and it is very difficult to get such good pieces in the ordinary market. Our collection of Moorish embroideries is not large and I feel it is important to strengthen it while examples as good as these can still be got at reasonable prices. As Morocco become [sic] more and more opened and pacified work of this type will get rarer and dearer. It is already much dearer than it was in 1912. Under these circumstances I would like to recommend for purchase for textiles the pieces marked T which will be most useful additions to our collection.

(V&A: MA/1/B1545)

Wace's concern about getting these things while they were still available was a valid one. The reference to the year 1912 is because it was then the Treaty of Fez was signed dividing Morocco into French and Spanish protectorates. An increasingly Europeanized Mediterranean had led to social and economic changes across the region that would have an impact on the production of crafts. This made embroideries rarer while at the same time increasing their accessibility to European collectors. In the early nineteenth century Morocco had resisted European influence by restricting the activities of European merchants and rejecting diplomatic efforts to stop the slave trade. However, in 1860 a brief war with Spain led to Morocco paying the Spanish an indemnity that they paid with a loan from Britain, in return for which Morocco was opened up to British trade. Prices were rising, pieces were getting scarcer and not so much embroidery was being done and there was a possibility the tradition could be lost.

French has pointed out that the papers of Wace and Dawkins recognise the effect of social change and manufactured imports on the production of embroideries and also

on the willingness of people to sell them (French 2009: 79). She has referred to this urge to collect things before they are lost as ‘salvage ethnography’ and quotes a letter from Wace to J. L. Myres dating from 1905 in which he says:

I think you ought to write a small handbook on these embroideries. In a few years time supply will be scarcer – and unless something is done all records will be lost of them, since the vast majority of pieces fall into private hands where they are used as curtain, or cut up to decorate dresses and the like.

(Myres Archive Bodleian Library MS Myres 40 F61 & 62 quoted in French 2009: 39)

When the French took control of Morocco in 1912 they were concerned about the loss of craft skills as Marie-France Vivier explains.

The Protectorate was committed to protecting the regional arts which had been in crisis since the late nineteenth century because of competition from European manufactured products. The policy – which aimed to preserve native artistic production, while opening the door to modern innovations – established the Service des Arts Indigenes in Rabat in 1920... They were dedicated to supporting the development of local industries, and, as part of this effort, they founded museums to assure the survival of the artistic patrimony. The Rabat and Fez museums, created in 1915, preserve and displayed ancient traditional pieces and made research possible, allowing the public to become acquainted with this rich heritage. (Vivier 2002: 18)

In addition to exhibitions within Morocco, the Service des Arts Indigenes also displayed Moroccan textiles at the colonial exhibitions of Marseilles, Strasbourg and Paris in 1922, 1924 and 1931 respectively (Vivier 2002: 19). This promotion of Moroccan crafts would have contributed to the increase in prices that Wace complained of. French control of the region may have made it harder to compete with French museums that had direct links to the Service des Arts Indigenes.

Wace emphasised the increasing rarity of Moroccan embroideries again in a memo to the director dated 22 August 1929, which deals with the purchase of a piece of Moroccan embroidery (T.119-1929) from the Anglo-Persian Carpet Company.

Please see Mr Ashton's minute about this interesting little panel of Moorish embroidery which came from Sir Arthur Church's collection. It belongs to a type not well represented in the collections and in view of the increasing interest now being taken in Moorish embroidery this will be a welcome addition to the collections, as it represents an old type of work which it is quite impossible to obtain in Morocco. The price is quite reasonable...  
(V&A: MA/1/A632)



Fig. 6.1: Moroccan Embroidery, Silk on Linen, 35.6 cm by 38.1 cm, V&A: T.119-1929 and T.148-1934

Another issue that these two purchases (from Mrs Black-Hawkins and the Anglo Persian Carpet Company) reveal is how closely the Departments of Textiles and Circulation were working together. Items that were not considered suitable for the Textile Department were often referred to the Circulation Department and purchased. Sometimes objects were split between the two departments. For example, in his note to the Director of the museum dated 7 January 1928 Wace makes the case for

acquisitions by the Circulation Department from those offered by Mrs Black Hawkins as well as his own:

Mr Kennedy has selected some others for Circulation including two specimens of woven silk. These would all be very desirable for Circulation purposes. The total for this department (the pieces marked T) comes to Fifteen Pound Ten Shillings and the total for Circulation (the pieces marked circ on the two agendas) comes to eleven pounds. I would like to recommend purchase accordingly.  
(V&A: MA/1/B1545)

It appears from comparing the textiles in the two collections that examples better suited to display were kept in the textiles department while pieces felt not to be good enough for display but to be useful teaching tools were passed on to Circulation. This included partial or damaged pieces. For example, in 1929 when the textiles department acquired T.119-1929 (see above) for £5, which is an almost complete panel the Circulation Department acquires '3 panels of embroidery, Moorish' (Circ.219-1929 to 221- 1929) and '5 fragments of embroidery Moorish,' (Circ.222-1929 to 226-1929) for £15 from the same source (see Fig. 6.2). Circ.226-1929 and Circ.224-1929 have been embroidered in the same pattern and appear to be two sides of one object with a middle section missing.



Fig. 6.2: Embroidery, Silk on Linen, nineteenth century, Moroccan; Xauen. V&A: Circ.226-1929

The full extent of how closely the two departments were working together is also shown by the paperwork relating to the acquisition of T.119-1929 and Circ.226-1929.

On 24 August 1929 Eric Maclagan (Director) replied to Wace's note asking permission to acquire T.119-1929: 'I should like to see the other pieces, in which I understand that Circ. is interested. I am not quite convinced that this is good enough for the main collections but I am open to conviction.' (V&A: MA/1/A632)

Maclagan's doubt about the piece may be due to concerns about the damage to the piece which can be seen in the bottom right hand corner (see Fig. 6.1). A further note from Leigh Ashton (curator in the Textiles Department from 1925-1931, who later became Director of the Museum) to Wace reveals how the situation was finally resolved.

I saw the Director about this matter. The Circulation pieces were sanctioned some little time ago... As you know, the whole group was to cost £20 and we were paying what was probably rather a high price of our one piece in order that Circ. might have the benefit. I think the Director was willing to sanction our piece, when I explained the situation, but perhaps you will speak to him.

(V&A: MA/1/A632)

The purchase was allowed to stand and these items remain in the V&A today.

### **Embroidery Types**

The V&A collected a very specific range of textiles from Morocco during this period, which was embroidery from urban areas. They occasionally acquire examples of other textile techniques such as weaving but they rarely collect textiles from rural areas. It is the urban textiles that are closely related to those from other parts of the Middle-East and the Mediterranean as these were the areas that saw the greatest influx of migrants from, and trade with these areas. (Spring and Hudson 1995: 53) It is these links and influences that led to Moroccan embroideries being viewed as examples of decorative arts rather than as ethnographic artefacts and makes them interesting to the V&A.

Different cities within Morocco developed their own traditions as Vivier explains:

Each city developed its own style, and some cities produced two kinds of embroidery, whose techniques, colors, and designs are clearly distinct but aesthetically related... These embroideries emerged from two currents, one from Spain, the other from the Balkans. The embroideries of Fez and of Chechaouen, Salés two styles, Rabat's ancient embroidery, and those of Azemmour and Meknes derive from Spain and from the Andalusian, Jewish and Muslim waves of immigration. The second current produced aleuj embroidery and the Fez stitch, both imported by the Turkish and Circassian women... and the embroideries of Tetouan, which were brought by Algerian refugees.  
(Vivier 2002: 44)

The V&A was conscious of these different traditions and keen to see as many of them as possible represented in the collection as is shown by a note from ABH Smith, a curator in the Textiles Department, to Wace dated 18 December 1924:

As arranged by telephone, I visited Mr Arditti's firm ... to see his large stock of Moroccan embroideries, and to make a selection with a view to possible purchase. I selected 22 pieces, a large proportion being examples of Rabat and Tetuan work, as the former locality is represented by only two embroideries in our collection and the latter not at all.... (V&A: MA/1/A783)

The V&A eventually purchased examples of embroidery from Tetouan, Rabat and Sale in Morocco and an Algerian pillowcase (T.101-1925 to T.107) from Arditti.



Fig. 6.3: Tanshifa, Morocco nineteenth century, embroidered silk, 378.5 cm by 31.8 cm. V&A T.106-1925

The two pieces acquired in 1925 appear to be the only pieces in the collection from Tetouan. When 106-1925 was accessioned it was listed as a sash and is now described by the V&A as a 'curtain panel'. However, it is likely to be a tanshifa or mirror veil, similar to those from Algeria described in Chapters 3 and 4. Tanshifa are not used elsewhere in Morocco but Vivier has pointed out that embroidery from Tetouan was influenced by the influx of Algerian refugees following the French taking control of Algiers in 1830 (Vivier 2002: 44). They may have brought the



tradition of embroidered Tanshifa with them. Isabelle Denamur, drawing on the work of Jeanne Jouin suggests, however, that this type of embroidery in Tetouan predated the French conquest of Algeria (Denamur 2003: 61).

The background is of a bright yellow silk. The use of coloured silk satin as a base for embroidery began in the late nineteenth century, before that linen or naturally coloured silk were used (Vivier 2002: 67). The pattern is made up of a symmetrical arrangement of flowers in blue, white, purple, red and green at each end. Along one long side is a row of detached flowers worked in similar colours. A red silk edging has been attached to the same side which is decorated with individual flowers but has been cut away along most of the length. The pyramid of flowers at each end with the line of flowers along one edge is typical of Tetouan Tanshifas.

The V&A has several examples of Rabat embroidery. A good example of Rabat embroidery is T.157-1927 (Fig. 6.4). This cotton cushion cover is 94 cm long and 33 cm wide. It features dense red embroidery typical of Morocco's capital city along three sides. This border is 11cm deep on the long and one of the short sides and 16 cm deep along the other short side. There is a 25 cm opening along the unworked edge. The work is incomplete and the final side has not been embroidered. This example again suggests an interest in the techniques and process of embroidery rather than merely in the finished article.



Fig. 6.4: Cushion cover, Silk on cotton Rabat, Morocco nineteenth century, 94cm by 33cm V&A: T.157-1927

The V&A was keen to collect samplers from Morocco when the opportunity arose. These fitted well with the V&A's collecting interests as they showed a large number of techniques in one piece. The V&A has a large and impressive collection of samplers, mainly from Europe. Moroccan samplers are known as *chelliga* which Vivier has said are 'in effect, diplomas proclaiming their skill.' (Vivier 2002: 41). Moroccan women were taught embroidery by a *Mu'allima*, a professional woman teacher who often ran a workshop. The *Mu'allima* would train girls from poorer backgrounds as apprentices and they would produce work for sale or on commission. The *Mu'allima* was responsible for the design of pieces. Girls from well-off families would also be taught to embroider by the *Mu'allima* but they would sew as a pastime (Spring and Hudson 1995: 55). These women worked on things for themselves and their homes and, as young women items for their wedding trousseaus (Vivier 2002: 41). In 1933 the V&A was able to purchase a Salé sampler (T.35-1933, Fig. 6.5). The sampler is made of cotton and embroidered with silk in double running, back, cross, long-armed cross and satin stitch. Most of the patterns shown on the sampler are

those associated with Salé, although the top left corner features the denser stitches and patterns of Rabat (Fig.6.6).



Fig. 6.5: Sampler, embroidered silk on cotton, Morocco nineteenth century, 103cm by 73.5cm V&A: T.35-1933



Fig. 6.6: Top left corner of sampler showing Rabat embroidery. V&A: T.35-1933

It is worth quoting at length a note written by Wace to the Director of the museum dated 22 March 1933 as it reveals several interesting things about the work of the department.

You will remember that I told you that Mr. G.D.Pratt, the Treasurer of the Metropolitan Museum in New York, for whom we have acted on several occasions in helping him to acquire textiles for the Metropolitan Museum, left in my hands a small sum of money, which he asked me to use to purchase some items which he knew we would like to have in the collections here. The pieces were all of Eastern or Mediterranean character. One of these pieces is this Moroccan sampler. It was sold at Sotheby's some little time ago and a friend of the Museum tried to secure the mixed lot in which it was sold, as she wished to keep the other embroideries, but promised the sampler to the Museum. The Lot, however, went beyond the limit she proposed and was secured by a dealer. Thanks to Mr. Pratt's gift I have now been able to secure the sampler from the purchaser. It is an extremely nice Morocco sampler from Sale and is particularly interesting in that in addition to the usual Sale patterns it shows in one corner Rabat patterns done in the characteristic Rabat manner. This is the first time I have seen Rabat patterns on a Morocco sampler. I have made enquiries from Mrs. Black Hawkins, who had brought Moorish samplers in the past, but she has always told us she has never been able to find a Rabat sampler even in Morocco. The appearance of Rabat patterns on this Sale sampler is therefore particularly interesting and in view of the catalogue of Moorish embroideries now in preparation this will be the most useful accession to the collections. I should like to recommend, therefore, that Mr Pratt's gift be gratefully accepted.

(V&A: MA/1/P1977)

The relationship with the Metropolitan Museum of New York revealed in this quote shows the two museums co-operating in a mutually beneficial relationship. The convoluted path the sampler took to be eventually acquisitioned by the museum tells us something not only about how the museum sometimes functioned but also reveals how keen Wace was to have this piece in the collection. Again, the rarity of good examples of Moroccan embroideries is raised. Wace also refers in this note to a 'catalogue of Moorish embroideries', unfortunately this seems never to have been completed.

## **Relationship with the British Museum**

The archive also reveals useful details about the V&A's relationship with the British Museum during this period; in particular the debates about which objects should be seen as ethnographic. A note to the Director from Wace on 18 April 1928 regarding the acquisition of some examples of Moroccan dress (T.94-1928 to T.96-1928) raises the issue of whether North African material should be collected by an ethnographic museum, such as the British Museum, or a Museum of art and design like the V&A.

I have enquired ... at the British Museum ... as to whether they have a collection of Moorish textiles or Moorish costumes. They tell me that they have not, although they may have one piece of Moorish embroidery and that generally speaking they regard Moorish objects as too Mediterranean to be ethnological. Therefore, if we accept these costumes here we should not be encroaching on their province in any way.  
(V&A: MA/1/C2290)

The concern about 'not encroaching' on the British Museum's territory was a particular concern to the V&A at this time. In 1926 the V&A had bought some Byzantine Ivory and a porphyry plaque at great expense. There was some debate at the time about whether or not these pieces should be seen as archaeological specimens which would have been better suited to the British Museum. The two museums had always been keen not to compete for the same objects because of the effect this would have on prices. This debate led to the production of a memorandum entitled *Line of Demarcation to be Drawn Between Collections of the V&A and the British Museum* (V&A:ED/84/116). This document dealt mainly with the division between art and archaeology. It argued that art students were increasingly interested in seeing examples from a broader range of periods which had lead the V&A into collecting material that would previously only have been seen as of archaeological interest (V&A:ED/84/116). Although this particular example dealt with archaeology and art

rather than ethnography and division it is evidence of the museum carefully considering its position. Furthermore, after the 1926 conflict over the porphyry and the plaque the annual reports on acquisitions are often quite critical of how particular departments have spent their budget (V&A: ED/84/116). This probably contributed to the Textiles Department thinking carefully about their purchases in light of what the British Museum was collecting (V&A: ED/84/111). The memorandum also mentions briefly the division between art and ethnography, 'The whole question of the overlapping between the Museum and the British Museum, and more particularly with the two Departments of British and Medieval art and Ceramics and Ethnography ....is unquestionably a difficult one.' (V&A: ED/84/116). The V&A were keen not to duplicate the work of the British Museum and ethnography was seen as their province.

The following year the issue of making sure that the V&A was not duplicating the work of the British Museum comes up again when Wace assures the director in relation to the acquisition of some Moroccan embroideries (T.150-1929 and T.151-1929) 'the British Museum does not include Morocco in its Ethnographic collections.' (V&A: MA/1/B1545). This is not a process that is going on only in the V&A, as the discussion with the British Museum proves. Morocco and the rest of North Africa, as part of the Mediterranean world, are too closely linked to Europe, both geographically and culturally to be viewed as ethnography. At the same time Sub-Saharan Africa was becoming more firmly seen as a place for ethnographic study and as a result of this a large number of African textiles would be removed from the collection over the next few years.

At this time the world is being divided into those suitable for an ethnographic approach and those that are not. The development of anthropology as an academic discipline and ethnography as a museum category went hand in hand with the development of British Empire in Africa (Coombes 1994). Ethnographers' desires to stake out an area for themselves in museums and academia led them to emphasising the need for a different, 'scientific' approach to the material cultures of people judged by them to be savage (Coombes 1994). This 'scientific' approach was only deemed suitable to the understanding of people who were seen as 'other' and had been judged in some way inferior to those studying them; hence it was not used to understand the material cultures of Britain or Europe. Although this process began in the late nineteenth century, it is not until the 1920s and 1930s that we start to see references in the V&A files about which objects should be classed as ethnography. This is because by this time ethnography and anthropology are firmly established as disciplines in their own right. For example it is only from the 1920s onwards that anthropology can rely on state funding (Coombes 1994:4)

## 6.2 Disposal

In 1933 a process was begun that would lead, by the end of the decade to 38 African objects held in the textile department being removed from the V&A collection permanently. Only five of the 38 textiles were from North Africa, while the remainder came from Sub-Saharan Africa. At this time the V&A had only accessioned 71 textiles from Sub-Saharan Africa so these 'lost items' account for almost half of the collection. It is normal practice for museums periodically to remove objects from their collections and reasonable to send items to collections which may be able to make better use of them. However, the high proportion of African textiles that were removed from the collection is unusual and makes this notable.

This research is haunted not only by the absence of items not accessioned by the V&A but also by the loss of things that were collected by the museum. In some cases the removed items are traceable while others have disappeared forever. This absence creates a number of methodological problems. If our view of the V&A collection of African textiles and its history is based only on what is in the collection today, we are left with a distorted picture due to the high percentage of material that was removed in the 1930s and continued to be removed until 1992 (see Chapter 9). However, it is sometimes difficult to tell what exactly was in the collection, as we have to rely on the descriptions in the written archive rather than the physical objects. This problem is compounded by the weeding of archival records. Once an object has been removed from the collection, typically only the most basic information about that item is kept. We know from the textiles we do have access to and their corresponding records that



the information may be inaccurate and if the object is gone there is no way to verify the details that we do have.

### **Board of Survey 1934**

As a national collection with an international reputation, the removal of items from the V&A is not a process that is taken lightly, nor was it in 1933 when the process was begun. The process for removing items from the collection was (and still is) called a Board of Survey. Ten years earlier rules had been laid down for conducting a Board of Survey in Museum Decisions No. 30: Appointment of Boards of Survey which outlined in general terms the Board of Survey process (V&A: Museum Decisions No.30). Appended to this two years later, in 1925, was another document entitled Memorandum on the Constitution and Procedure of Boards of Survey for the Guidance of Officers Serving Thereon which went into much greater detail about the exact procedure for conducting a Board of Survey (V&A: Museum Decisions No.30). These rules were still in force in 1933 and, in fact, the rules were not changed again until 1953 (VA: 60 ED84/433). Museum Decision No. 30 states that ‘A Board of Survey is a body appointed periodically by the Director under an authority of the President of the Board of Education dated July, 1921’. It also makes reference to a document from 1921 (V&A: 1921/3976) upon which current policy was based. This may or may not be the same document referred to in the quote above. It is impossible to tell as neither of them have been found in the archive to date. Museum Decision No. 30 is the earliest record currently known to be in the archive that records the procedure for a Board of Survey or other method of disposal, and I am indebted to the V&A archivist Tom Midgley for managing to locate it during this research.

The appendix to Museum Decision No.30 laid out in sixteen steps the procedure that Boards of Survey would follow. It is beyond the scope of this study to go through all sixteen points in depth. Some details however are worth noting. The first point deals with the authority (i.e. the Director of the Board of Education) under which the Board of Survey is convened and is quoted above. It then goes on to say:

Under the Charter of the Museum, the Board of Education have very wide powers of disposing of objects which are not affected by any special Trusts or conditions, if it appears to them to be for the advantage of the Museum to do so. – e.g. by way of exchange or sale for the purpose of acquiring better and more representative specimens.  
(VA: Museum Decision No. 30)

This question of the limits placed on objects by the donors is obviously an important one and is returned to in point six ‘Particular care should be taken in the case of objects presented or bequeathed to see that the power of the Board of Education to dispose of such objects is not limited or affected by any special Trusts or conditions.’  
(VA: Museum Decision No. 30).

The department wishing to remove some of its collection would compile a list of the objects they wished to dispose of. The Board of Survey which was ‘composed of at least three Officers of the Museum nominated by the Director’ then had the responsibility of going through the list and making recommendations about what should be done with each object (VA/Museum Decision 30). The first thing the Board checked was whether the object might be useful to another department within the museum, and if another department accepted the object it was taken off the list. Once these objects had been dealt with, the Board had a number of options to consider in relation to the remaining objects as laid out in point 8.

The Board of Survey will consider and recommend whether the objects shall be:

- (1) Offered to an institution or Museum to be named in the recommendation
- (2) Sold
- (3) Returned to lender
- (4) Used as material
- (5) Destroyed as useless
- (6) Put back for further enquiry on grounds which the board will state.

If alternative proposals are made, the order in which action is recommended should be stated.

(VA: Museum Decision 30)

Points nine and ten allow the Board of Survey to seek additional information from people within the museum and experts outside to help them make their decisions.

Most of the remainder of the Memo deals with how the paper work should be dealt with and the procedure to have it signed off by the Director, the Board of Education and ultimately the Treasury. The notes about and decisions of the Board of Survey are then archived along with skeletal records relating to the objects disposed of.

The first mention of this particular Board of Survey comes on 7 February 1933, over a year before the board actually sat. A note from Mr Tattersall, a curator in the Textile Department, to Wace explains.

Mr Wace

During the course of the recent stocktaking note has [been] made of those registered objects which apparently are useless to this Department and might with advantage be disposed of. These have now been put upon the two attached lists.

List A. Objects unsuitable for exhibition or reference in any museum on account of deterioration or absence of artistic interest. These might be destroyed or used as material for repairing or in other ways.

List B. Objects of some interest, but of a kind already well represented in the Textiles collection. A few of these might be useful in other Departments of the Museum, and others might be passed to other institutions.

The lists will no doubt require revision as so far no attention has been paid to possible 'diplomatic' reasons for retaining some of the objects.  
(V&A: RP/1933/584)

The 'diplomatic' reasons are a reference to possible conditions placed on the objects by donors to the museum and also to objects that had been accessioned into the V&A collection in the recent past. This issue of how long ago an object had to have arrived in the museum to be considered for removal seems to have been due to concern about the possibility of a donor enquiring after an object they had given to the museum only to discover the museum had given away or destroyed their object. This issue seems to have been under discussion in the early 1930s (VA: ED84/833) and a rule was made in 1932 which stated that objects presented to the Museum less than twenty-five years previously could only be removed under special circumstances (VA:32/1397). This point was emphasised when the official orders for the board to be appointed were given:

I feel bound to call the Board of Survey's attention to the fact that, in view of the Secretary's minute of the 28<sup>th</sup> May, 1932 (32/1397), very special reasons will have to be given for the destruction or alienation of the objects included in the list which have been presented or bequeathed to the Museum during the past twenty-five years.  
(V&A: RP/1933/584)

Two days after Wace received the above note from Tattersall he wrote to the Director of the Museum, passing on the lists. These lists are extensive; over 400 objects are listed in total and they include 40 African textiles. List A had thirteen African items on it while list B had 28 African items on it. One African object listed as Saddle, Abyssinian (929-1873) appears on both lists. Both this item and another from List A (T.193-1916) which at the time were categorised as one of the 'objects quite unsuitable for Museum purposes' remain in the V&A collection to this day (V&A: RP/1933/584).

No further action was taken for some time but on 29 November 1933 the Museum Director wrote 'I hereby appoint a Board of Survey to deal with the objects from the Department of Textiles listed on these papers, consisting of Mr. Wace (Chairman), Mr. Kennedy and Mr. Molesworth' (V&A: RP/1933/584). Wace, as previously mentioned, was in charge of the Textiles Department; Mr Kennedy was a curator in it while Molesworth was a curator in the Department of Architecture and Sculpture. This was the normal make-up for a Board of Survey, it was customary to have two curators from the department concerned and one from another.

At this point the official list of textiles to be considered is drawn up and it includes 48 African textiles. All of the African textiles from Mr Tattersall's lists are included along with eight additional pieces. The objects from List A have now been classified as either 'Unsuitable for exhibition or reference: deteriorated or lacking in artistic merit' or in the case of two West African Grass mats (204 and 205-1869) merely 'no longer required'. The objects from List B are now classified as 'No longer required in the textiles department.' The 'new' objects are more or less evenly spread across the two categories.

The Board was finally held the following year between 6 and 12 March and submitted its official report on 27 June. The committee stated that it had looked at 440 objects, mostly items that had been made in Japan, Persia and Hungary during the nineteenth century; they argued that the museum had accepted these items in far greater quantity than it should have (VA: RP/1933/584). The committee recommended about 110 objects for sale, twenty for use as material in the museum's Art Room and the rest to

be either given to other museums or destroyed. On the subject of destruction the committee reported

We have decided that about a hundred objects are either so deteriorated of lacking in artistic value that we could neither wish to see them exhibited in Provincial Museums nor hope to succeed in selling them. We accordingly recommend that they should be destroyed.  
(VA/RP/1933/584)

Unfortunately on the form where items are listed individually these items are all designated as 'Unsuitable for exhibition or reference: deteriorated or lacking in artistic merit' making it impossible to tell which items were in poor condition and needed to be destroyed and which were merely judged by the curators as 'Unsuitable' or 'lacking in artistic merit'. Twelve African textiles were put into this category although ultimately only four were destroyed. Of the remaining eight one was retained by the V&A, two went to other Museums and the rest were sold at auction as part of large lots. The Board of Survey recommended 110 textiles for sale but only three African textiles were put in this category (1164-1903, 1165-1903 and 1169-1903). However, by 1939 when this particular Board of Survey was finally concluded 18 textiles from Africa were sold at auction (V&A: RP/1933/584).

The majority of African textiles were designated on the 1934 list as 'No longer required in the textiles department.' The report expands a little on this, making specific reference to some of the African items.

4. We consider that about a hundred-and-sixty objects are definitely suitable for issue to Provincial Museums or (in a few cases) appropriate institutions in London. The objects in this category are mainly
  - a. Moorish and Abyssinian saddlery of good quality that would be of value to Museums which specialise in exhibits of this type.
  - b. A number of objects of ethnographic rather than artistic interest
  - c. Far Eastern and other costumes

d. Of special interest to certain localities  
(V&A: RP/1933/584)

Category b which makes direct reference to the division between art and ethnography reveals that this was a factor that played a part in the museum's decisions about what it excluded at this time. The Board of Survey recommended finding new homes in other museums for 22 of the African objects and suggested Liverpool Museum, which had a strong ethnographic collection, as a possible recipient. However, in the end they only manage to get seven pieces accepted by other museums and none of these went to Liverpool. It is worth looking at the fate of the North African and Ethiopian saddlery that was singled out as being likely to be of interest to other museums in more detail.

There were three items of Moorish saddlery that were considered by the Board of Survey (1093-1851 'saddle and housings,' 1094-1851 'saddle, Camel,' and 376-1880 'horse trappings'). It is not clear whether they are referring to all three sets of saddlery or one in particular as being of interest to other museums. All three were designated 'Unsuitable for exhibition or reference: deteriorated or lacking in artistic merit' on the original Board of Survey. The opinion of at least one of these saddlery sets had changed over the course of the survey. There were fifteen Abyssinian items on the list, five of which could be described as saddlery. These were 212 and 213-1869, horse trappings and chain, leading rein respectively; and 930, 931 and 932-1873 described as bridle, halter or shoulder band, martingale. All of these were listed as 'No longer required in the textiles department' except for 212-1869 which was deemed 'Unsuitable for exhibition or reference: deteriorated or lacking in artistic merit. In addition there was a set of West African saddlery (1160-1903) also listed as

‘Unsuitable for exhibition or reference: deteriorated or lacking in artistic merit’. (VA: RP/1933/584)

The V&A made some effort to find these items new homes and in 1934 wrote to the Royal Scottish Museum, which had an ethnographic department, saying

... I want to ask you ... about a large number of various things in this department which we have now obtained sanction to dispose of. We no longer require them here and we would like to give you the first opportunity of acquiring them, especially as regards a rather interesting collection of saddlery – Abyssinian, Moroccan and West African. We have no space, however, to exhibit it here. The Abyssinian saddlery was obtained just after the expedition in the 60’s.  
(VA: 195-1)

The Royal Scottish Museum wrote back to say ‘We are pretty well represented in the type of saddlery work you mention and would not I think consider adding to our collection of it.’ (VA: 195-1) There is no record of the V&A offering the saddles to other collections but this does not mean they did not. The museum was not able to find a provincial museum that wanted these saddles. All five of these pieces were sold at auction in 1939; as were 1094 and 1093-1851 or at least what remained of it after it was treated for moths in 1937. It is not clear from the archived papers what happened to 376-1880. (VA: RP/1933/584)

The only set of items from the list that the V&A was able to find a new home for in a museum are six pieces of clothing from Ethiopia that appear to go to the University Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology in Cambridge (now known as the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology). All six of these textiles came to the V&A as a result of the Battle of Magdala in 1868 and four of them had belonged to Queen Terunesh (see Chapter 2). The V&A had seven other items that it was hoping to dispose of at this time (including the ‘saddlery of good quality’ mentioned above) but these did not



go to Cambridge. The only evidence that these textiles were, indeed, sent to the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology is a memo to the transit room dated 24 August 1934 asking them to 'pack and despatch the objects in the attached list'. The objects listed are the five Ethiopian textiles, three Chinese textiles, some Russian silk, something from the South Seas and a Hawai'ian cape. There are no records in the V&A archive relating to the transfer of these pieces so it unclear if the V&A approached the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology or vice versa.

The fate of these textiles was something of a mystery. The online catalogue for the present day Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology lists 39 items of Ethiopian clothing in its collection but none of these were recorded as coming from the V&A. Rachel Hand, the curatorial assistant for Anthropology confirmed in 2010 that she had no record of Ethiopian items from the V&A entering their collection although she was able to confirm that the Hawai'ian cloak they were transported with arrived and is still in the collection.

However, there were four Ethiopian pieces on the catalogue of uncertain provenance that, judging from the descriptions, seemed likely to be the 'lost' V&A items. This was confirmed by a visit to Cambridge on 7 September 2010. A comparison between the V&A descriptions, which are fortunately quite detailed, of the objects and the textiles themselves confirmed beyond doubt that the four Ethiopian robes in the museum of Archaeology and Anthropology are the ones that were in the V&A. These are 395 and 396-1869 (Z 19184 Anth and Z 19188 Anth)<sup>1</sup> which are two silk cloaks donated to the V&A by the Secretary of State for India and that once belonged to

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<sup>1</sup> When writing about these objects I will continue to refer to them by their V&A numbers. I have included the MAA numbers in brackets.

Queen Terunesh the wife of Emperor Tewodros of Ethiopia (see Chapter 2). The other two robes are similar 923-1873 (Z18161) and 211-1869 (Z 19185) which was sold to the V&A by a Colonel Stanton, the provenance of this robe is unquestionable as it has a small label on the hem identifying it as Stanton's (Fig. 6.7).



Fig. 6.7: Robe bearing Colonel Stanton's name. MAA Cambridge Z19185

Unfortunately it has not been possible to locate the final two Ethiopian objects '398-1869 Drawers, Silk Damask' and '397-1869 Robe with sleeves' in the MAA collection.

It is impossible to tell from the records kept in the MAA how the museum decided which pieces it wanted for its collection, when or if they viewed the textiles before

accepting them and whether they approached or were approached by the V&A, because no written records remain relating to these textiles. The acquisitions list in the annual report for the year 1934 only lists the arrival of one object from the V&A. The report reads: 'Victoria and Albert Museum: Feather cloak formerly belonging to Kamehameha I, King of the Sandwich Islands (34.1159)' (MAA: Annual Report 1934:4). However, a note in the annual report warns that the acquisition list is incomplete '1267 numbers have been registered in the acquisition book; this does not however, indicate the total number of acquisitions, as one number frequently covers several specimens.' (MAA: Annual Report 1934)

The numbers on the objects indicate that they were found in the MAA but do not give us a date for when this happened. Below is an example of the records created for these objects in the MAA (Fig. 6.8); the card is undated and attempts to date it by doing comparisons with handwriting samples of curators proved fruitless. A search through the document boxes relating to the years 1933, 1934 and 1935 also failed to yield results; nothing was found relating to either these textiles or the Hawai'ian cloak.

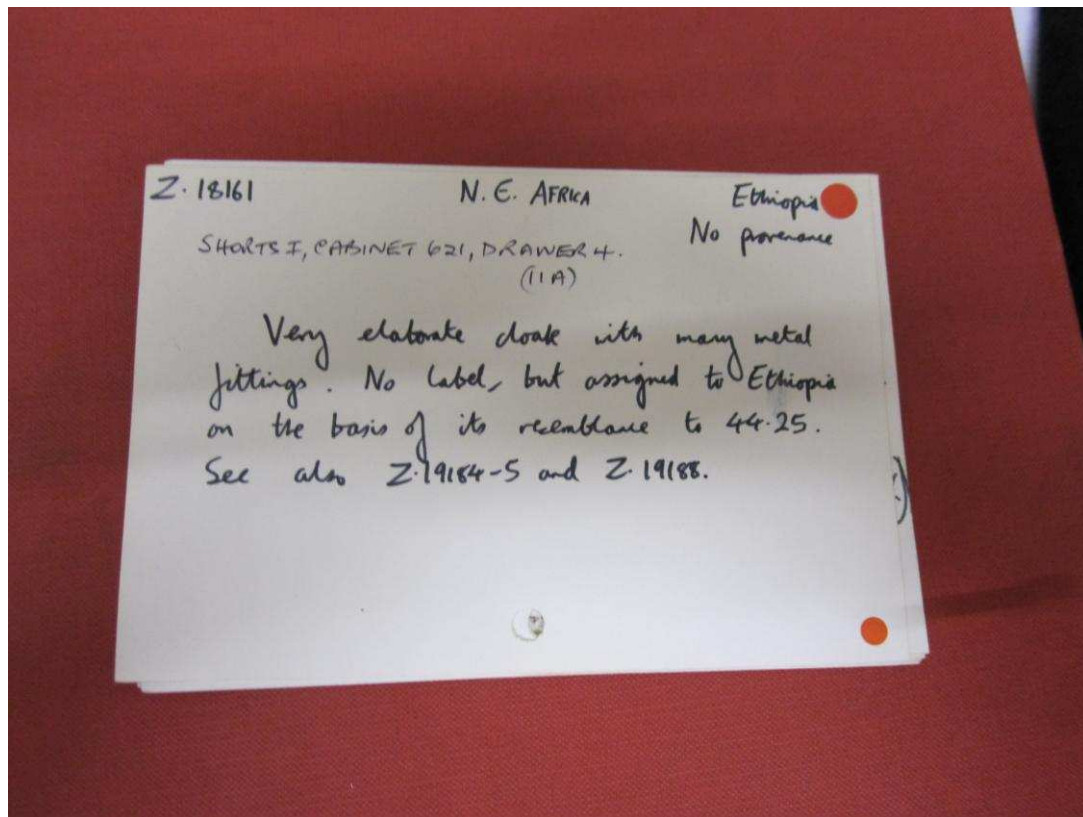


Fig. 6.8: Catalogue card. MAA Z18161

One unexplained feature of the removal of Ethiopian textiles is why certain Ethiopian textiles were retained by the V&A and others were removed is that the V&A chose to keep two Ethiopian Kamis (399 and 400-1869) which were quite similar to each other and get rid of four (or five if we count the missing 397-1869) silk cloaks leaving themselves with no examples of this kind of clothing. It seems more logical to have kept one good example of each. The cloaks are spectacular objects made of silk and heavily worked with embroidery and decorated with metal work (see Chapter 2, Fig. 2.6 – 2.11), but the V&A did not keep any of them. It is possible that because the objects were made of European produced silk the V&A did not regard them as African and therefore did not see them as an example of something not otherwise represented in the collection. Equally it is possible that during the Board of Survey

they were not aware of the Kamis - dresses - (399 and 400-1869) and Shamma - shawl - (401-1869) and so kept them as an oversight.

### **Transfer to Circulation**

Six African textiles were transferred from the Department of Textiles to the Circulation Collection in 1934. One of these was a saddle bag from Tunisia that had been purchased from the Great Exhibition in 1852. The rest of the textiles were described as being from 'West Africa' and they had all arrived in the museum in 1903, they included a cane tray (1162-1903), a cane bowl (1163-1903), two pairs of cotton trousers (1167 and 1168-1903) and one cotton robe (1166-1903). Three of these pieces remain in the collection today, the Tunisian saddle bag, the cotton robe and one of the pairs of trousers (1167-1903). They were returned to the Textiles department when the Circulation Department was closed in the 1970s.

The Circulation Department had pre-dated the museum itself but it wasn't until 1909 that the Department formed its own collection following the re-organisation of the museum and the opening of the new building, as Anthony Burton explains:

The Circulation Department was reorganized as part of the Re-arrangement proceedings. In the past borrowers from Provincial Museums had been allowed to select loans from among the objects exhibited in the museum's permanent galleries, but this was now thought too disruptive, "with the result that the Circulation Department may now be equipped with what is at least a working collection, although it may be necessary for some years to come to make further additions in order to meet the growing needs of this department." [Report of the Board of Education for the Year 1908-1909 London HMSO, 1910 pp.98-9] (Burton 1999: 172)

We know that the Circulation Department struggled to meet the demands placed on its collection and in 1922 'an unsuccessful plea to the Board of Education for more [objects]' was made (Burton 1999: 172). Board of Surveys in other departments

therefore represented a good opportunity for the Circulation Department to swell its own collection. The aims of the Circulation Department were different to those of other departments, so objects that did not fit the collection policy of the other departments were often considered suitable for Circulation.

Unfortunately it is not possible to know more about the transfer of these textiles to the Circulation Collection, such as why these particular pieces were chosen, who made these decisions and how, because the file relating to this transfer (V&A: RP/34/2940) has not survived. From this time on African textiles that were either already in the V&A collection or that were being considered for accession to the museum were far more likely to end up in the Circulation Collection than in the Textiles Department.

The Board of Survey decided that the Textiles Department should retain one of the African items that it was instructed to consider. They kept T.193 and T.193a-1916, a pair of 'Camel-Hair' curtains from 'Soudan'. These curtains had originally been judged as 'Unsuitable for exhibition or reference: deteriorated or lacking in artistic merit.' The decision to keep the curtains therefore seems strange. However, it is unlikely that the curtains were kept because of a change of opinion about their artistic merit. The more likely explanation is that the curtains were retained because they had only been given to the museum in 1916 and therefore could not be disposed of under the 25 year rule. The Board of Survey commented on this issue in its final report to the Director on 27 June.

We have given special consideration to the objects which have been given or bequeathed during the last twenty-five years. Of those which we do not consider worthy of retention, some are so damaged that we have no hesitation in recommending that they be destroyed. As regards the

remainder, had they been acquired at an earlier date we should have recommended that they be given to Provincial Museums, and we think that the possibility of taking this action should now be considered. Among the latter there are a few objects which we should have recommended for destruction because of their condition but we think that possibly some provincial museum might be glad to accept them in default of better specimens. If they are refused we think they should be destroyed.  
(VA: RP/1933/584)

It seems that the camel-hair curtains were kept because they weren't in such poor condition that they could be disposed of, but at the same time were not felt to be of sufficient interest to be offered to provincial museums. They have remained in the V&A collection and have not been examined by a Board of Survey since.

### **An Ongoing Process**

By the end of 1934 five African textiles had been given to Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, six had been transferred to the Circulation Department, five were destroyed on 27 July 1934, and it had been decided to keep the Sudanese curtains. This left the textiles department with approximately 30 African textiles still to be dealt with. Three of these had been recommended for sale and the rest were to be transferred to provincial museums. At this point the archives go quiet on the subject of these textiles and no further mention is made of them until 1937 when there is an undated note to the Director of the V&A from the Textiles Department asking what to do with the outstanding objects (VA: 195-1). There is no reply in the archive and it appears that no action was taken at this time. The issue raises its head again two years later in a letter dated 5 May 1939.

We have in the ... Museum Store a considerable number of objects (details on the sheets filed herein) which have from time to time been recommended for sale by Boards of Survey. Now that we have established procedures for dealing with saleable objects, there appears to

be no reason why we should not proceed to carry out the recommendations of the boards. Do you agree please?  
(VA: 195-1)

The reply states that before anything can be sold it needs to be put before two Boards of Survey and Mr Digby, Mr Weekly and Mr Ashton (standing in for Mr Molesworth) are accordingly appointed to a Board of Survey before the end of the month. The make up of the committee was similar to the previous one. George Wingfield Digby was now head of the Textiles Department and Mr Weekly was a curator in the department. Ashton was the member from a different department as he had been transferred to the Ceramics Department (1931-1937).

On 17 June 1939 Digby, Ashton and Weekly write to the Director to say they have been through the objects previously recommended for sale and those that were to be offered to provincial museums that have not been accepted. They go on to suggest that the Textiles Department should keep five items, two pieces should be given to the Circulation Department, the Woodwork Department takes two pieces to use as upholstery, one cap should be offered to the Royal United Services Museum and one saddle to be offered to York Museum and Art Gallery. None of the African textiles are included in this list; they all come into the other category about which the board writes: 'We recommend that the remaining objects on the two lists be offered for sale. It would be an advantage if they could be sent to a saleroom within the next week or two in time for the summer sales.' (VA: 195-1) This is done, and on 26 July 1939 Puttick and Simpson wrote to the museum to say that the textiles were to be sold at auction in 50 lots the following week. (VA: 195-1)



The reason for the delay between the 1933 Board and the eventual disposal of these textiles was hinted at in Mr Gutts note to Mr Willcock on the 5 May when he says 'Now that we have established procedures'. Throughout the 1930s the V&A seems to be grappling with removing objects from the collection. We have already seen that there was debate around how long something had to have been in the collection before it could be considered for removal, but the museum appears to be facing a greater problem which is the sheer volume of material that is being dealt with at this time. Following the V&A's audit by the Exchequer and Audit Department of the Board of Education in 1937, the museum is criticised for not keeping on top of this issue.

At our local visit to the Victoria and Albert Museum this year we noticed that the Board of Survey held since our last visit dealt only with the disposal of plaster casts included ... and that in other Department there had been no board since 1935.

Since 1932 there have been 34 boards which have disposed of a great accumulation of material and we would now like to suggest that, in order to avoid further accumulation a regular procedure should be laid down for holding periodic Boards of Survey in each Department...  
(V&A: ED84/433)

This reveals that the museum was under pressure from the Government in the form of the Board of Education to reduce its collection through the removal of material no longer seen as relevant. The V&A reply that they were already considering the problem and had decided that from 1938 each department would be required to put a list together for a Board of Survey annually. The archive shows this to be true; the V&A had been considering this problem for some time (VA: ED84/433).

Another problem the V&A was grappling with in relation to the disposal of objects at this time was finding other museums who wanted these items. A minute sheet dated the 28 June 1935 states

It frequently happens that there are objects such as those condemned by the Disposals Board or offered to us as gifts and not required, that are available for acquisition by Provincial Museums. At present the method of dealing with these cases is troublesome and unsatisfactory, as each case is treated independently and often needs repeated attention over a long period. ... a more definite system would save much trouble and probably lead to more equitable distribution of the objects.  
(V&A: ED84/433)

The writer goes on to say that 'at present the Department of Textiles is more concerned in such cases than any other.' It seems likely that the time lapse between the holding of the 1934 Board of Survey and the final decisions regarding these textiles is due to the difficulty of finding them new homes in other museums, a problem exacerbated by the number of items the original Board of Survey had dealt with.

## **Conclusion**

In September 1935 the V&A had tried to expedite the process of finding provincial museums by putting a notice in the Museums Journal.

### **Gifts of Museum Objects: Offer from the Victoria and Albert Museum.**

It sometimes happens that objects are offered as gifts to the Victoria and Albert Museum which are not required either for the main collections or the Department of Circulation, but which at the same time might very likely be acceptable to some other Museum in the country ... In order to secure a reasonably fair distribution of such objects it is proposed that particulars of them should be published from time to time in the Museum's Journal and that applications ... should be invited; the ultimate selection of a suitable Museum being left in the hands of the Department concerned and the Victoria and Albert Museum ... it is not proposed to offer in this way any objects except such as appear to the Officers of the Victoria and Albert Museum to be of good quality and sufficient importance.

(Museums Journal xxxv September 1935 p.227)

It is not clear how successful this scheme was as it has not been possible to find further reference to it in the V&A archive. It does show, however, how much the museum and in particular the Textiles Department was struggling with its efforts to

weed the collections in the face of senior museum staff and the Board of Education.

The view that African material should be in ethnographic collections was established by this time and so the V&A began to remove African textiles from its collection

One way or another, by the end of the 1930s the V&A had removed a significant proportion of its Sub-Saharan African textiles from the collection. In the case of the Ethiopian textiles they were given to an ethnographic collection and, unable to find homes for the other textiles in ethnographic museums, the others had either been kept or auctioned off. At the same time North Africa's place in the collection had been strengthened, due to a judgement made both within and outside the museum that the material culture of Morocco could be categorised as decorative art and not ethnography.

## **Chapter 7: Producing for Empire: ‘Wax Prints’ for West Africa 1947-1960**

As well as making an effort to collect textiles produced in Sub-Saharan Africa, the V&A’s Circulation Department also collected textiles produced in Britain specifically for sale in Africa. The role of the Circulation Department was to put together exhibitions that toured to regional museums and also to art colleges. These cloths, known as ‘wax prints’ even though no wax is used in their manufacture, were factory-produced printed cottons. They are now seen as an archetype of African dress but were in fact made in Britain and other European countries from the late nineteenth century onward. With links to British and Dutch trade and imagery grounded in West Africa but heavily influenced by Indonesian batik, these are perhaps the most transnational of all the textiles in the collection. Their presence in the V&A collection reflects not only Britain’s links to Africa but also the UK’s changing position in global trade after World War II.

### **‘Wax Prints’ for West Africa**

These textiles were produced in Europe, not Africa, and it has been questioned whether or not they can truly be regarded as African. John Picton responded to this question when he chose to include them in the 1995 *The Art of African Textiles: Technology, Tradition and Lurex* exhibition held at the Barbican Gallery in London.

One might argue, of course, that, as these fabrics are the products of European industry, they have no real place here; ... this opinion might seem to be reinforced by the colonial encouragement of any attempt to subvert local hand-production by the import of cheap alternatives ... However, the facts of the history of this wax and fancy prints turns this view on its head ... it is evident from their [Vlisco, a Dutch company, and ABC, a British company that manufacture these textiles] archives that these developments were contingent upon a local agency with a far greater determining role

than has hitherto been realised, and secondly that the employees of these firms are kept in work by African patronage.  
(Picton 1995: 24-5)

Picton has also found evidence that from very early on in the history of these textiles they were being worn in a way that could subvert colonial authority. He writes:

‘Not only was the design process effectively directed by African people but the designs themselves permitted a domestication of the changes then current, the modern representation of a sense of tradition, and a quiet challenge to colonial authority.’ (Picton 2001: 60) Moreover, in the build up to and following independence from British colonial rule these cloths were used to express support for independence and pride in an African identity.



Fig. 7.1: Printed cotton produced for the West African market. V&A: 84b-1947.

Although several European countries, notably the Netherlands but also Switzerland, produced 'wax printed' cottons for the West African market. The V&A collection only contains examples produced in Britain. These textiles could be seen as examples of African dress and fashion. However, they also represent an important aspect of British textile manufacture and design. The majority of goods produced by the Lancashire textile industry were for export to parts of the empire, which were termed 'native markets' rather than for 'home trade' or the domestic market. (Launert 2002: 7) After World War II when the V&A began to collect these textiles, the British export market was increasing in importance. It was as examples of successful British manufacturing and design that these textiles were collected by the V&A. This perhaps explains why the V&A was only interested in British made examples of these textiles, although it is important to remember that for practical reasons the cotton mills of Lancashire would have been a lot more accessible to V&A staff than factories overseas. The majority of these textiles were accessioned into the museum during the late 1940s, although they continued to enter the circulation collection well into the 1960s.

Although there is evidence of European textiles, alongside other goods such as gold, silver and slaves, being traded in Africa as early as the fifteenth century, it was not until the seventeenth century that the Europeans began to formalise their trade. It was at this time that the Royal African Company (1660, restarted in 1672), the Dutch West India Company (1621) and the Compagnie du Senegal (1673) were founded by Britain, Holland and France respectively (Hopkins 1973: 92). As trade became more common and it was revealed how potentially lucrative the market was, a trade struggle emerged, as Ruth Nielsen explains.

From 1720 to 1750 a trade struggle took place between the exporters of Indian prints and the dealers in Manchester cloth. At first Manchester printers provided coarse linen cloth in dull colors, but these did not satisfy Africans who preferred the lighter all-cotton India prints in bright colors. The Manchester cloth, therefore, was modified to suit the African taste, and by 1750 it had acquired a quality comparable to that of the Indian textiles. (Nielsen 1979: 469)

The Manchester producers were only able to compete by making high quality cloth with colours and patterns designed to appeal to a West African market. In addition the manufacturers needed to pay attention to regional differences as it rapidly became clear that preferences for certain colours and designs varied along the coast. When the manufacture of 'wax prints' was established over a century later this experience of adapting to the desires of the African consumer would stand the Lancashire textile industry in good stead.

The textiles that would come to be known as 'wax prints' began to be produced towards the end of the nineteenth century, and their origins reflect a complex history of international trade. Following the establishment of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands in 1815, Willem I of the Netherlands established the Dutch Trade Company (NHM) to try and boost the Dutch economy. Haarlem, in the south west of the country was a town that was particularly struggling, and in the 1830s the NHM decided to encourage textile mills to be set up in the area. Textiles were a good choice for the town which had a history of cloth manufacture dating back to the sixteenth century, and the establishment of the Netherlands had meant the secession of Belgium and the loss of the lucrative Flemish textile industry. One of the mills established at this time was Previnaire & Co which would later amalgamate with a 'Turkey Red' dye works to become

the Haarlem Cotton Company (Haarlemsche Katoen Maatschappij -HKM) in 1875 (Picton 1995: 25).

Around the same time there was interest in reproducing Indonesian batik as a way of expanding the European cloth trade in the East Indies by undercutting local production (Nielsen 1979: 470). Picton explains that:

It was reckoned that it ought to be possible to replicate Indonesian batiks by methods that would be cheaper than the local use of a pen with a small reservoir of molten wax, and to this end J. B. Previnaire had adapted a French banknote-printing machine, nicknamed as a result '*la Javanaise*', to print a resin resist on each face of the cloth. However, almost immediately '*la Javanaise*' was succeeded by an adapted duplex form of the engraved roller-printing machine previously invented and patented by Thomas Bell, a Scotsman, in 1783 ... The products of Previnaire's inventions were not particularly successful, as the application of resin paste by means of duplex rollers inadvertently produced cracking and bubbling effects that were not acceptable to Indonesian taste; and it proved difficult to control the application of a second colour. Yet they were found to sell in West Africa.  
(Picton 1995: 25-26)

In fact, it seemed that the very 'cracking and bubbling' effect that made these cloths unsuitable for the Indonesian market were seen as desirable in West Africa. The link to batik, which is made using wax as a resist, was retained in the name 'wax prints'.

Why did these Dutch printed cloths mimicking Indonesian batik prove so popular on the West African coast? There are a number of possible explanations. It is worth remembering the existence of an already flourishing textile trade network in the region through which the cloth could be marketed. The interest in Indonesian inspired designs specifically has been explained by the presence on the Gold Coast of mercenaries who had worked for the Dutch in Indonesia but



after 1872 (when Britain took control of Dutch interests on the West African coast) returned to settle on the coast, notably in Elmina, which has an area called 'Java Hill' (Picton 2001: 159.) Picton has pointed out that:

[W]hile it would be oversimplistic to attribute the origins of the popularity of the Indonesian-style printed cloth in West Africa entirely to the repatriation of the mercenaries, they must clearly be a significant link in the chain, as a community with a taste for the exotica of Southeast Asia. (Picton 2001: 160)

British involvement in the trade initially came in the form of Ebenezer Brown Flemming a merchant from Glasgow whose company Brown Flemming Ltd, Dyers and Printers of African and Colonial Specialities, acted as HKM's sole agent for the sale of its products in West Africa (Picton 1995: 27). Although Flemming was based in Glasgow, he was descended from a Flemish textile manufacturing family which perhaps explains his involvement with the Haarlem textile industry which had historic links with the Flemish textile trade. Flemming also had contacts in West Africa through the Presbyterian missionary church and his work as a trader. Picton has emphasised the importance of Flemming in the early development and success of these textiles. He writes 'the exact documentary evidence has yet to be found, but it is clear that the engraving of the rollers by the Haarlem Cotton Company almost immediately responded to Gold Coast taste or sensibility.' (Picton 2001: 160) Despite being influenced by aspects of Indonesian batik, the imagery of the textiles also relates specifically to the cultures of West Africa. Someone was feeding this information back to HKM and it seems likely that, as sole agent for the company, Flemming would have been instrumental in this process.

British companies also continued to produce cloth aimed specifically at the West African market. Although they were not able to make use of the Dutch Indonesian designs which had been registered in Britain under Fleming's own name the sale of British textiles in West Africa continued to grow and the manufacturers in Manchester began to make use of the duplex roller system developed in Haarlem. The earliest engraving for a 'wax print' using the duplex roller system made in Britain was in 1909. (Picton 1995: 29)

Picton has argued that 'It is clear from the available documentary evidence in the Netherlands and in England that, by the first decade of the twentieth century, a repertoire of patterning has been established so thoroughly that it has remained in fashion to the present day.' (Picton 2001: 160) As well as the Indonesian designs several other sorts of pattern were made in Britain and the Netherlands for the West African market, such as designs based around proverbs, education, the accoutrements of chieftainship and commemorative prints. This last category of prints was made using a different technique. They were developed in Britain during the late 1920s and did not use a duplex roller system. This meant the pattern was only printed on one side but made it possible to reproduce photographic imagery, typically portraits of well-known people on the cloth. The earliest known example of this has been identified by Picton and dates from 1928. (Picton 2001: 161) Although no examples of 'commemorative prints' were collected during the twentieth century, in 2002 the V&A acquired a print featuring photographic images of George VI & Elizabeth produced by The United Africa Company Ltd in 1937 (T.493-2002).

Writing about the period 1900-1939, Frederika Launert has argued that ‘Lancashire’s ability to respond appropriately to consumer demands played a significant part in establishing and maintaining exports to markets such as West Africa.’ (Launert 2002: Abstract) Launert emphasises the role of the merchants in the design process, as they provided the crucial link between consumers and manufacturers who were separated not only by distance but by culture too. ‘Lancashire’s export trade depended upon a highly developed mercantile structure that provided the Manchester designer with the means to produce a pattern that belonged aesthetically to a culture of which she or he had no direct experience.’ (Launert 2002: 119) It is worth noting that while researching her PhD thesis *The Role of Design in the Lancashire Cotton Industry, 1900-1939* Launert visited the V&A archive to view the ‘wax prints’ for West Africa in the collection.

Although the textiles were produced in Europe and designed by Europeans, the Africans were not without agency. Picton has written that ‘An African patronage determined almost from the very outset what it wanted to see in these cloths, and it was an African patronage quick to recognise the advantage of someone else doing the work.’ (Picton 1995: 27) A trader who wasn’t responsive to local tastes and differences would struggle to sell them in a competitive market.

Christopher B. Steiner sees ‘wax prints’ as having a role as a kind of cultural mediator, and has pointed out that:

The textile trade between Europe and Africa in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a back and forth process in which European textile producers responded to African desires, and in

which African consumers reacted to European stylistic and commercial proffers.  
(Steiner 1985: 91)

He goes on to argue that as a result of this, the textile producers could not afford to view Africans in the simplistic and patronising terms that many colonial officials did.

The image of Africa which emerges from the woven threads, fast dyes, and printed fabrics differs from the image put forth in the writings of the 19<sup>th</sup>-and-20<sup>th</sup> century explorers, missionaries, colonial administrators, and amateur anthropologists. Whereas the latter offered, with few exceptions, the popular mental images of the so-called “dark continent” and “merrie old Africa” (see Beoku-Betts 1976:87, Curtin 1964:9, Hopkins 1973:10), the former presented a far more subtle interpretation of the ontology and stylistic basis of African life.  
(Steiner 1985: 92)

Steiner’s argument is backed up by an exchange between George Picking, a merchant working in West Africa, and the Chairman of the Board of Trade Investigative Committee on Textile Industries from 1916. Following a discussion about what makes a particular item popular and the fact that price is not the most important factor Picking attempts to explain why design and finish are so important: ‘It is a thing that catches the eye straight away.’ To which the Chairman responds ‘even in the uncivilised eyes of the African blacks?’ and Picking says ‘yes’ (BT55/122 quoted in Launert 2002: 125).

In a competitive and lucrative market the manufacturers could not afford to underestimate the sophistication of their discerning African customers. Although this exchange took place in 1916, the same remained true in 1948. The ‘wax prints’ for West Africa required not only good design but the best technical production Manchester could offer:

The cloths made for this part of Africa are lightweight plain-weave cottons in continuous lengths; the type of colouring used necessitates the very finest kinds of resist and developed dye printing, a kind of printing, in fact, which normally is only used for the best quality silks and rayons. But the intricate designs and deep rich colours which the West African native demands can be produced in no other way. (Fraser 1948: 104)

The 'wax prints' for West Africa include an almost dizzying array of patterns reflecting different influences and interests. Some of these patterns have been in production for over a century and continue to be produced today. Others are produced on shorter runs and may only have been popular for a limited period of time, as things that are novel and new are highly desirable. Nielsen has identified eight categories of pattern that are used on these 'wax prints'. She lists these as Indian cottons, Javanese batiks, European prints, African indigenous cloth, traditional African objects and symbols, historical/current events or people, natural forms and geometrical designs. (Nielsen 1979: 482-484) The wide range of pattern types on the textiles reflects their diverse and transnational history.

### **The Circulation Department in the Post-War period**

British produced 'wax prints' were purchased for the V&A by the Circulation Department. One of the main roles of the V&A, throughout its history, had been to circulate artefacts to colleges and art schools for educational. The Circulation Collection grew dramatically after the Second World War both in terms of scope and ambition to become one of the most dynamic and interesting departments in the V&A and one to which the V&A's current Victorian and twentieth century collections owe an enormous debt.

The man responsible for expanding and reinvigorating the department after World War II was Peter Floud who was Keeper of the Circulation Department from 1947 to 1960. His obituary in *The Times* following his death in 1960 explained the scope of his task. 'In building up the Department of Circulation after the war he had almost to begin anew, transforming the character of the department and bringing it in closer touch with the needs of the post-war world.' (*Times* 25 January 1960). The department explained the changes it was undertaking at this time in a leaflet that is undated but produced while Floud was Keeper entitled: *Circulation Department: Its History and Scope*.

The war, and the evacuation and return of objects, naturally left an aftermath of confusion, but it also provided the first opportunity since 1909 for a comprehensive review and overhaul of the whole Department. Such a review would in any case have been necessary in view of the new problems resulting from the passing of the 1944 Education Act and the consequent great expansion in the number of Secondary School borrowers, and of the new opportunities arising from the remarkable thirst and enthusiasm for travelling exhibitions. A further important incentive to review was the report of the Standing Commission on Museums, which strongly emphasised the need for expanding the Department's activities in many directions and particularly stressed the desirability of the Department acting as a central co-ordinating agency for Circulation from other National Museums besides the Victoria & Albert.  
(V&A [1950?]: 2)

The best accounts of the history of the Circulation Collection have been written by the Circulation Department itself. When the department was re-launched after the Second World War in the late 1940s it produced a number of written accounts of its history and its role in the museum. These were both leaflets published by the V&A and articles for newspapers and journals. Naturally these accounts had a tendency to celebrate the work of the department but they are factually accurate and also provide useful information about how the department saw itself. As discussed earlier (see Chapter One) historians have debated

whether the origins of the museum should be dated to 1837 and the founding of the School of Design in Ornamental Art based in Somerset House or whether the museum's origins are more properly to be found in 1852 when the collections of the School of Design in Ornamental Art were brought together with objects acquired from the Great Exhibition of 1851. As far as Peter Floud was concerned although the museum itself may not properly have been established until 1852 the Circulation Department traced its history back further.

It is appropriate that the circulation department of the Victoria & Albert Museum should be planning during 1948 to revive and enlarge its traditional arrangements for lending objects to schools all over the country, for this year marks the centenary of the inauguration of the original lending scheme from which the work of the department ultimately derives.  
(Floud 1948)

The Circulation Department certainly can be traced back to the collections at Somerset House which were put together for educational purposes. The leaflet mentioned above explains further: 'The Museum took over not only the actual collection, but – far more important – it also took over the principle of lending a part of its treasures to the provinces, and thus established a practice that has been consistently adhered to ever since' (V&A [1950?]: 2)

It was this role that the Circulation Department was in charge of from 1852 when the museum was fully established. Initially the department organised a travelling museum of 600 objects which toured the country in a specially designed railway truck. The first Circulating museum was a success and in 1860 a second, larger museum was organised and again toured the country's railways. However, it was not repeated again and the department focussed instead on educating students in art colleges and industrial apprentices by putting together instructional

collections that were sent out to the colleges. The scheme proved popular and grew rapidly. In 1865 there were only a dozen or so art schools involved but by 1880 there were over 100 art schools borrowing a total of 6,000 objects. Due to pressure from MPs in Parliament it was decided from 1880 that the department should also cater to local museums and art galleries so that the general public, as well as students could benefit from the scheme. This was another success and the department continued to expand, with 13,000 objects being loaned to 30 provincial museums in 1885 and 29,000 objects being loaned to 80 museums in 1900. Loans to art schools also continued to increase in this period with 200 schools involved in the scheme in 1890 rising to 280 in 1900. (V&A: MA/15/23)

Unfortunately it is impossible to trace which objects were circulating, and where individual objects were going.

The main focus of the department was not collecting artefacts; it was responsible for organising and overseeing the circulation of objects from the other museum departments. However, the scale of the department's activities meant this needed to change as the leaflet explained.

By 1909, when the present Victoria & Albert Museum building was completed, and the entire organisation of the Museum was overhauled, the Department's activities had reached a scale which required a re-definition of its relation with the other Museum Departments. Up till then, although the Department had small collections of its own, it also had the right to borrow objects from the other Departments for loan to the provinces. However, the constant movement of objects backwards and forwards between Departments had caused many difficulties, and it was therefore decided in 1909 that this system should be abandoned, and that, instead, each of the departments should set aside a portion of its collection to be permanently transferred to the jurisdiction of the Circulation Department. Since then the Circulation collections have been completely separate from the main Museum collection. (V&A:MA/15/23)



The department continued to expand and in 1919 began lending to secondary schools as well as art colleges and provincial museums and galleries as it was believed 'aesthetic education' would be more effective if it was begun earlier. The following year they started to circulate collections of lantern slides. By 1939 the department was lending 40,000 objects to over 600 different institutions annually. (V&A: MA/15/23)

The Circulation Department offered a number of different types of exhibitions. Loans were divided into two main categories; those that were offered to museums and art galleries and those designed for teacher training colleges and art schools. The offerings to museums and galleries was made up of five different types of exhibition: large exhibitions, three dimensional objects, framed original material for wall displays, small photographic exhibitions, and groups of three-dimensional objects that could be fitted in a single case. (V&A [1950?]: 4) This research is mainly concerned with the material designed to be used in art schools and teaching Training Colleges which was made up of 'framed examples' of various objects, (the Department estimated that 70% of the frames contained original material), and unframed mounted photographs and originals. Some of the contemporary textiles were not framed in order that students should be able to handle them. The Circulation Department explained further what they offered

The framed material, amounting to over 10,000 examples, is divided into two categories. The first category consists of some 6,000 examples made up into sets of 18 frames each, which are lent to schools, a term at a time. Each set covers a specific theme, and the number of different themes amounts to over 150 covering between them almost the whole field of the fine and applied arts. Some sets are intended for direct use in technical instruction in the classroom,

while others are designed to be enjoyed by the general body of students.

(V&A [1950?]: 6)

The second category was made up of 4,000 frames of 'miscellaneous stock' and institutions were allowed to select 18 individual frames (later increased to 25) which they were allowed to keep for a whole year. Framed sets were kept only for a term at a time and each school was responsible for forwarding the collections on to the next institution that had been allocated a particular set.

They were not returned to the V&A between schools in order to keep travel costs down. The service was free, although each school paid for carriage one way (to the next school) and was responsible for insuring the objects while they were in their care. (V&A: MA/17/1/1)

Schools could request the sets they thought would be most suitable by consulting the Exhibition and Loan Collection Prospectus. These were produced annually and listed the material available for loan. The School would fill in the application form and list the sets it wished to have in order of preference and the museum would allocate exhibitions as fairly as possible based on listed preferences. (V&A: MA/17/1/1)

The loans to art schools and teacher training colleges were a success as a Report on the Circulation Department, 1948-53 reveals: 'The present scale of the scheme can be judged from the fact that in 1953 a total of over 8,100 framed objects and 4,500 mounted photographs were on loan at any one time to 285 regular borrowers.' (V&A: MA/15/21) This aspect of the scheme was not

expected to expand any further as almost all the art colleges in the country were already participating. The report went on to explain that:

A perennial, and probably insoluble, problem is the preference of many Art School teachers for contemporary rather than historic examples; for if the Department were to purchase enough material to satisfy this demand it would find itself saddled with a regular surplus of late-contemporary and therefore obsolete material, which had been, but was no longer, fashionable among teachers. The only course for the Department is to purchase such contemporary material as appears to have permanent values, but no more, and at the same time to persuade disappointed applicants of the equal merits of the historic material available.  
(V&A: MA/15/21)

One of the most important aspects of the Circulation Department's work was renewing the museum's interest in collecting examples of contemporary design and manufacturing. In 'Art on loan: a national museum scheme' an article Floud wrote for the Times Educational Supplement published on 17 January 1948 he explained why the museum was 'behind' with its contemporary collections.

The activities of the loan department were discontinued during World War II. When the department was re-opened in 1946 it was faced with considerable difficulties. The 100,000 objects had to be returned from shelter, sorted out, and classified. More important, the collection had to be brought up to date. In the case of a museum dealing only with historic material this difficulty does not arise, but the loan collections of the Victoria & Albert Museum include large collections of contemporary decorative and industrial art, and as a result of the war years, these had naturally become seriously deficient.  
(Floud 1948)

However, in his history of the museum, Burton has suggested that problems with collecting contemporary material predated the war. 'In the 1930s it is clear that the V&A had lost interest in modern design, and modern designers and design critics had lost faith in the V&A.' (Burton 1999: 189) Regardless of why the

contemporary collections were lacking and when the problems had begun, it was the Circulation Department which set about rectifying the situation as Hugh Wakefield explained in an article he wrote for *The Archaeological News Letter* in April 1950 entitled 'Lent by the Victoria & Albert Museum'

A good deal of our time in the Department is spent in searching for finely designed examples of contemporary work in almost all forms of the fine and applied arts. It is interesting to notice that none of the national museums apart from the Circulation Collection are directly concerned with contemporary applied or industrial art.  
(Wakefield 1950: 185)

The emphasis on contemporary objects and the importance of textiles in particular was explained in a leaflet from the archive that is undated but seems to have been produced when the circulation scheme was re-launched in 1948.

The special requirements of the Art Schools have naturally led to an emphasis on contemporary work, with the result that the Circulation Department's contemporary collections are now much more extensive than those of the main Museum. The collection of contemporary textiles is the largest and most representative in the country... This material is, of course, added to year by year, in order to keep it up to date, and a high proportion of the Department's annual purchase-grant is regularly spent on contemporary objects. Though the majority of these contemporary examples are, naturally, English, efforts are made to ensure a proper representation of the best foreign work. Although currency restrictions have made this difficult since the war.  
(V&A [1950?]: 3)

It was exactly for these reasons that the 'wax prints' for West Africa were acquired by the V&A, as examples of contemporary design and manufacture to be used for educational displays for art schools. Floud made reference to the contemporary textile displays in an article written for *Home and Country* magazine in April 1949 explaining what Women's Institute members would be

able to see on display at Denman College, a short stay adult educational centre run by the National Federation of Women's Institutes since 1948.

In addition to these historic textiles, other sets consist entirely of contemporary specimens. These are particularly popular now that so little contemporary work is available in the shops. The majority of them are machine-printed furnishing fabrics, carefully selected from the mass of designs which are turned out for the export market and never normally seen by the home customer.  
(Floud 1948 V&A: MA/15/13)

### **The prints in the V&A**

By the late 1940s when the V&A began to collect these textiles the production of cloths specially designed for sale in Africa was a well established, if little known, aspect of British textile production. This is shown by the section devoted to these textiles by Grace Lovat Fraser in her book *Textiles by Britain* which provided a history of textile production in Britain and a survey of the state of the textile industry at the time.

Apart from the materials already mentioned as being made in Manchester, there is another type of specialized cloth which forms a separate and very important brand of Lancashire's production – trade cloths for export to Africa, India and the South Sea Islands. These cloths though produced in enormous quantities are almost unknown to the rest of the country, for they are made exclusively for the native markets for which they are so carefully and brilliantly designed; yet they are some of the most beautiful and exciting materials produced by Great Britain. To visit a warehouse department where these materials are stored is an unforgettable experience which transports one into a fantastic and romantic world of strange, heavy colours and exotic design. And all these materials are the product of the imagination of Manchester designers who are steeped in the traditions and tastes of far away native populations with whom they may never have had actual personal contact. The indictment of insularity, so often levelled at British designers, can never be better refuted then [sic] by examining a collection of such Manchester designed and produced goods.  
(Fraser 1948: 103-104)

Fraser was right to draw attention to the importance of the role of design in the success of these textiles. She went on to say that:

Each of the native markets has its own special fashions and colour preferences which must be meticulously observed. In West Africa the printed designs must conform to certain conventions, but within these they can be changed, and indeed must be changed, as often as possible.

(Fraser 1948:104)

In this Fraser was also right. The designs sold in West Africa differed greatly from those sold in East Africa or other parts of the world and even within West Africa designs and colours had to be tailored to specific countries or regions. Although Britain also produced textiles for East Africa, there are no examples of these in the V&A collection. This is probably due to the decline of trade between Britain and East Africa in the inter-war years in the face of competition from newly industrialised countries such as Japan. By the time the V&A started to take an interest in textiles produced for African markets, very few were being produced for sale in East Africa (although Fraser included a section on them in her book too).

The date of accession of the 'wax prints' for West Africa is interesting. Launert points out that between 1913 and 1930 the British export trade was shrinking. Trade was down 20-50% in British East Africa, Australasia, Ceylon, Canada, British Guyana, French West and Equatorial Africa and Latin America (Launert 2002: 156). This was due to increased competition from indigenous producers in some areas and increased competition from newly industrialised countries. Japan, for example, had notable success in the East African market (Launert 2002: 154). Despite this increased competition, trade was up 20% in British West Africa,

Union of South Africa, Rhodesia, Denmark, the Belgian Congo, Sweden and the British West Indies (Launert 2002: 156). Launert attributes this to the sophisticated mercantile structure which allowed for the design feedback necessary to produce desirable goods (Launert 2002: Abstract). Such was the strength of this system that throughout the Second World War cotton textiles remained the single most important manufactured import in British West Africa.

However, in the post war period things start to change. Although between 1937 and 1939 British cotton had a 70% share of the West African Market, by 1948 Britain had only a 38% market share (BT55/126 quoted in Launert 2002: 160). By 1955 it had dropped to 30% and Indonesia overtook West Africa as the largest single market for cotton piece goods (Launert 2002: 159).

Simultaneously the market for printed cottons in Britain became dominated by cheaper imports from East Asia. The market share in West Africa declined and the industry contracted but it held up better than trade with other areas and production for the home market. It was at this point that the museum started to collect 'wax prints' for West Africa.

Anxiety about industrial decline and a desire to prevent it wherever possible motivated an interest in these textiles, not just at the V&A but elsewhere too. For example, Fraser's book which was quoted earlier devotes a section to these textiles. It is the importance of the West African market to Britain and the competition that explains the increased interest in these cottons as Britain sought to promote her own industries in the face of post-war economic hardship.

The majority of the 'wax prints' for West Africa in the V&A collection were given to the museum by the companies that produced them, although a handful of items were also purchased from Primavera gallery in London. The museum received textiles from three British companies, all based in Manchester. They were J.A. Duke, Logan Muckelt and Co. Ltd and the Calico Printers association. The contraction that the market for textile exports was experiencing at this time is reflected by the fact that Logan Muckelt were in the process of closing down when they were contacted by the V&A (V&A: MA/1/L1836). In 1947 the Circulation Department contacted these companies to see if they would be willing to donate items to the collection. An internal note in the V&A's Logan Muckelt file explains why 'we [the Circulation Department] are in the process of building our collections of contemporary textiles.' (V&A: MA/1/L1836) The first companies to be successfully approached about donating textiles produced for the West African market were J.A. Duke and Logan Muckelt in Lancashire. Both firms are described as 'Old established firm working entirely for West African Market' (V&A: MA/1/L183 and V&A: MA/1/D/817). In the summer of 1947 J.A. Duke donated one and Logan Muckelt nine textiles to the museum. (V&A: MA/1/L183 and V&A: MA/1/D/817).

The paper work for these gifts reveals that the museum was not particularly excited about the acquisition of these textiles for the collection. J. A. Duke are described by the museum as 'helpful', presumably pleased and flattered by the interest (V&A: MA/1/D/817). The museums attitude can be inferred from a note describing a visit to J.A. Duke

Very large stock of machine-printed copies of native designs.  
Practically none are of any interest.



The following might be possible at a pinch.

1<sup>st</sup> choice: 36098

2<sup>nd</sup> choice: 26480

31792

33082

37583

(V&A: MA/1/D/817)

The museum wrote to J.A. Duke requesting 2-3 yards of design 36098 and this textile was accessioned into the museum on 17 August 1947 as Circ. 37-1947.

The textile is described in the accessions book as ‘Hand block printed calico, designed and produced by J.A. Duke and co, Manchester, for the West African Market.’



Fig. 7.2: Printed cotton produced by J.A. Duke for the West African Market, British, twentieth century. V&A: Circ. 37-1947.

Floud had a more enthusiastic response to Logan Muckelt and Co Ltd when he visited them in July 1947. A note in the file reads ‘Machine-printed examples are of little interest. Hand-block-printed examples contain many excellent prints.’ (V&A: MA/1/L1836). Floud selected nine textiles he wanted for the collection and divided them into three groups based on their desirability. All nine were

accessioned into the collection on the 27 August 1947 as Circ. 79-1947 to Circ. 87. 1947.

A year later it seemed that enthusiasm for these prints had continued to grow. On 2 June 1948, Floud again wrote to Logan Muckelt asking if it would be possible for his colleague Mrs Morris to visit the firm and select some more textiles. He explained why the museum would like more: 'The West African fabrics which you so generously presented to the Museum have aroused great interest in the schools to which they have been lent. It is so rarely that students have an opportunity of seeing fabrics of this nature.' (V&A: MA/1/L1836)

Following her visit to the company Morris selected six more designs and later that month seven (it is not clear why the extra textile was sent) more prints were accessioned into the museum as Circ. 209-1948 to Circ. 214-1948 and Circ. 223-1949. The following month this aspect of the collection was again expanded when the Calico Printers Association donated eighteen of its own 'wax prints' for the West African market (Circ. 392-1948 to Circ. 409-1948).

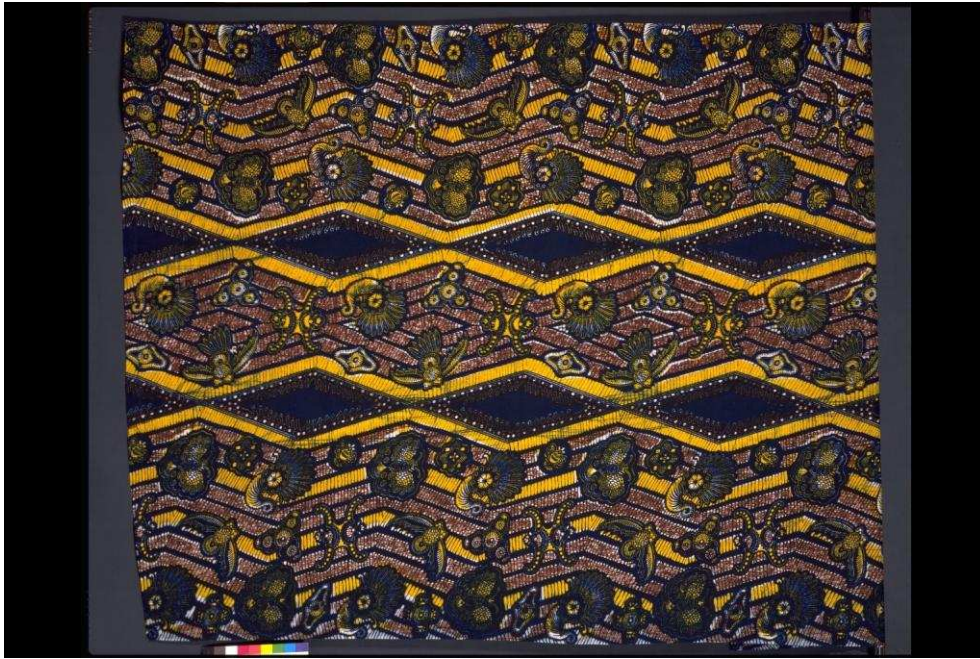


Fig. 7.3: Printed cotton produced by Logan Muckelt and Co for the West African Market, British, twentieth century. V&A: Circ. 212-1948

It is possible to trace, to some degree, the fate of the ‘wax prints’ for West Africa within the Circulation department through the prospectuses the department supplied to the colleges, although it is not possible to track specific objects or the schools that sets went to. The first prospectus in the archive was that produced for the year 1951-52 and lists the following in the textile section.

- 75. Contemporary Woven Textiles
  - 76. Contemporary Printed Textiles
  - 77. Contemporary Miscellaneous Textiles
- (MA/17/1/1: 6)

Underneath these listings is the following note ‘The above sets consist of framed original contemporary textiles, the majority of which are ‘Export only’ fabrics not seen on the home market.’ It seems likely that some of the West African ‘wax prints’ were included in set 76 the incomplete archive makes it impossible to confirm this. The following year (1952-53) an addition is made to the textiles section. Under the heading ‘FRAMED SETS: VARIOUS’ is listed ‘182. Wax

Resist-Dyed and Printed Cottons Including Javanese batiks and Lancashire designs for the West African market'. (MA/17/1/2: 4) It is interesting that the 'wax prints' for West Africa are offered with the Javanese batiks that they were originally designed to imitate, suggesting either that the curator putting the set together knew something about the history of these textiles or at the very least observed a similarity in the designs.

The 'wax prints' produced for the West African market continued to be popular, in fact they were one of the most popular of the offerings that the Circulation Department made to art schools and teacher training colleges. The 'School Loans 1956-57' explains that some of the exhibits are more popular than others and has decided to indicate this in the prospectus in order to assist schools in making their selections. 'Asterisks after set titles mean that more than 10 schools usually apply for each edition available, whereas only 3 can receive it on loan; 2 asterisks mean more than 20 requests, etc.' (V&A: MA/17/1/3 School Loans 1956-57: 4). Exhibition 182 which is made up a mixture of Javanese batik and 'wax prints' for West Africa has three asterisks after it meaning that the previous year the V&A had more than 30 requests for this set.

There is only one other set with more asterisks: set 171 'The Teaching of Embroidery' which has five stars. (V&A: MA/17/1/3 School Loans 1956-56: 12). In the following year's prospectus (1957-58) it was down to two asterisks, i.e. twenty requests, although this still makes it one of the most popular sets. It is worth noting that embroidery was down to three asterisks so this may be a response to knowing it was amongst the most popular set. In the prospectuses from 1959-60, 1962-63 and 1963-64, Exhibition 182 always has one asterisk

while most sets have no asterisk proving that it remained popular. (The selection of years is dictated by the archive of prospectuses and brochures which is incomplete.)

In the 1968-70 prospectus there was a change. They were now being produced to cover two years at a time and the format changed and became glossy.

However, regarding the African textiles in the museum there was a more important change: Set 182 is still listed but the 'wax prints' seem to have disappeared from it. The entry reads 'Javanese Batiks - Cotton garment pieces, fifty to a hundred years old, with elaborate designs produced by painting or stencilling in wax and then dyeing the lengths.' (Loan Collections 1968-70:7)

It is not clear why the textiles produced for West Africa were removed from the set but it is worth noting that Africa was still represented: another entry in the 'Framed Sets' section reads

176. West African Textiles  
Piece cottons and garments, variously dyed, painted and woven,  
principally from the Mary Kirby collection; lent loose in fibre boxes.  
(Loan Collections 1968-70:7 V&A: MA/17/1)

The Mary Kirby collection will be discussed in detail in the following chapter.

### **Ongoing Interest 1950s-1970s**

Interest in these textiles continued at the V&A with the purchase of three 'wax prints' for West Africa in 1953 (Circ. 334-1953 to 336-1953) for the price of £1.1.3 (MA/1/P2127) from the Primavera gallery in Sloane Street. Primavera is a craft gallery which opened in 1946 by Henry Rothschild and still exists today under new ownership in Cambridge. Rothschild obituary in the Guardian

described him as ‘the most influential entrepreneur in the field of contemporary crafts in Britain from the late 1940s to the 1970s.’ (Greg 2009). The V&A had a long relationship with Primavera, buying many pieces from them over the years, particularly ceramics. Primavera were instrumental in the development of British Studio pottery. (Greg 2009).

It is noteworthy that the V&A who, when they initially approached the manufacturers in the 1940s had not seemed particularly interested in these textiles was now willing to purchase examples from galleries. In addition, in the 1960s a number of these textiles came into the collection through a bequest (see Chapter 8).

A particularly striking example that was one of the textiles bought from Primavera in 1953 is Circ.334-1953 which shows birds flying across circles and reveals how long a popular design can endure (Fig. 7.4). Nielsen refers to this pattern as the ‘Flying Duck’ and states that it is ‘one of the oldest wax print designs ... The design was acquired from the old Brown Flemming collection and probably dates back to the 1880s’ (Nielsen 1979). A version of this design was included in the British Museum’s 2007 exhibition ‘Fabric of a Nation: Textiles and Identity in Modern Ghana’ that had been manufactured the year before. The pattern has become known in Ghana as A hen fye, (The Kings House) which refers to the palace of the Asantehene.





Fig. 7.4: Printed cotton produced for the West African market, British, twentieth century. V&A: Circ.334a-1953

Nielsen reveals that Barbara Morris, who had made the original selections for the Circulation Collection in 1947, had not lost interest in the printed cottons for the West African market by 1971.

A collection of early prints (1900-1939) for West Africa was studied and photographed at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London during the summer of 1971. Mrs Morris of the museum's circulation department had made a tentative classification of these prints according to subject matter. Some of the interesting designs from the collection were classified as: (1) anatomical designs, (2) architectural designs, (3) occupational designs, (4) tie-dyed designs, and (5) umbrella designs.  
(Nielsen 1979: 487)

This would represent one of the earliest attempts by a British curator or scholar to devise a classification scheme for these textiles. Unfortunately it has not been possible to trace further information about Morris's work on the textiles or the photographs themselves within the archives of the V&A.

### **British Fashion and West African Textiles**

As well as examples of the 'wax prints' as they would have been sold in the West African market place and smaller sample pieces to show the printing and the patterns, the V&A also has in its collection two examples of dresses made for a European market by British designers but using the 'wax prints' designed for a West African market.



Fig. 7.5: West African Evening Dress, designed by Matilda Etches, London, 1948. V&A: T.186-1969

This evening dress was made in 1948 by Matilda Etches, who is better remembered as a costume maker for the theatre, opera and ballet, but who also worked as a couturier (Fig. 7.5). This dress (T.186-1969) was donated, along with some other outfits, to the V&A in 1969 by Etches herself at the time of her retirement.



The cotton fabric is an example of a cloth designed in Britain and printed in Manchester specifically for export to Africa. The printed pattern has a number of features typical to these kinds of cotton and seen as desirable by the African consumers for whom it was intended. Firstly, the fabric design imitates Indonesian batik with its 'crackly' look, reflecting the transnational origins of these cloths. Secondly, the borders feature the letter 'V' and its Morse code signal which is three dots and a dash (...-). It is common for popular prints in Africa to reflect current events in some way and V-for-Victory was a popular subject for export cotton prints after the end of the Second World War.

The high fashion status of this dress that is suggested by the quality and detailing on this dress is proven by its appearance in *Vogue* magazine. In April 1948 (*Vogue* 1948: 71). The dress featured under the title 'Evening Distinction' and was photographed by John Deakin. The caption reads 'West African cotton dinner dress: flame and deep red print on copper: diagonal neck, sari edged' (*Vogue*, April 1948: 70). Also included in the section is another dress by Etches modelled by Vivien Leigh and photographed by Coffin, a Hattie Carnegie Great Coat modelled by Alida Valli and photographed by Cecil Beaton and a Rahvis dress illustrated by Louis Moles. None of these other dresses relate to Africa or Britain's export textiles. The enduring appeal and interest of this dress is borne out by its inclusion in 'The Cutting Edge: 50 years of British Fashion 1947-1997' exhibition held at the V&A from March to July 1997.

In 1968 Madeleine Ginsburg, a curator in the Textiles Department, had visited Etches at her home Brighton to view what the designer had to offer the museum

and select some pieces for the V&A collection. Ginsburg selected a Butterfly Cape and the West African dress. She was also pleased to find that Etches had additional material, including design drawings which she was prepared to give to the V&A. Ginsburg wrote in a letter dated May 1968 that 'They [the Textiles Department] were most appreciative of the photographs and press cuttings, which mean that we have, for the first time, a complete dossier (I hope this word does not sound too ominous) of a designer's work in the museum.' (V&A: MA/1/E817) Unfortunately nothing in the 'dossier' relates to the 'West African' dress but this interest in papers relating to the designer and the design process as well as the object itself represents a new approach to the collecting of fashion. It was at this time that the collecting of contemporary fashion began to be taken more seriously by the museum. This is shown by a letter from Ginsburg to Etches dated 9 June 1949

The image of our twentieth century costume collection has received a great boost through you! For the first time clothes from this century have been chosen to show the meeting of your advisory committee – a honour usually reserved only for medieval embroideries. They are to see the Butterfly cape and the West African dress.  
(V&A: MA/1/E817)

They were the first contemporary fashion items to be accorded this honour. While the dress is likely to have been shown to the advisory committee for skilful tailoring it is interesting that the dress chosen also happens to reflect the transnational nature of the twentieth century with its complex cultural and trade links.

A second high fashion dress made of cloth produced for the West African market was given to the V&A by Enid Fennemore in 1984. The dress was made by Edwin Hardy Amies and is a day dress of printed cotton with a pattern of white

circles on a brown background (Fig. 7.6). While on display at the V&A in 1997 this dress was described as ‘This stylish day dress has magyar sleeves and a tightly fitted bodice with a dropped waist. The circular skirt is embellished by a fashionable bustle bow.’ (V&A: CMS) It was displayed again in 2007 in the Golden Age of Couture: Paris and London 1947-57 exhibition. The exhibition label suggested that the bow was a way to add volume with as little fabric as possible, a reflection of the conflict between the extravagant fashions of the day and post war austerity.



Fig. 7.6: Day dress of printed cotton, made by Edwin Hardy Amies, Great Britain, 1947. V&A: T.236-1984

According to the V&A records the dress was made in 1947, although they do not say what the evidence is for this. This is not the first time Amies had used cotton

designed for the West African market in one of his dresses. There is a dress in the collection of the Costume Gallery at Platt Hall, Manchester made by Amies in 1942 that uses cloth intended for the West African market (Gallery of Costume 1957:481)

At the beginning of the Second World War the British government was anxious to promote the cotton industry and encourage export of fashionable designs. This led to the creation of the Cotton Board in 1940, followed in 1942 by the Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers. Amies was one of the original 'Top Ten' designers invited to join the society. Following the end of the war the work of the board continued in an effort to re-build the British textile industry following the war. It seems likely that Amies was making use of these cottons as part of his work for the Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers.

### **Contemporary Significance**

In 2007 the V&A held a show entitled Uncomfortable Truths – the shadow of slave trading on contemporary art and design. The exhibition was part of a wider national initiative called 'Remembering slavery.' The press release explained the aims of the show thus:

Two hundred years after the bill outlawing the British slave trade was passed by Parliament, the V&A is marking the event with an exhibition of work by eleven contemporary artists from Europe, Africa and America. Their work draws directly on the legacies of imperialism and slave trading, prompting the viewer to consider the impact of slavery historically and in today's world.  
[http://www.vam.ac.uk/files/press\\_release/32156\\_press\\_release.pdf](http://www.vam.ac.uk/files/press_release/32156_press_release.pdf)

Of the eleven artists, four were commissioned to make pieces for the show. One of the artists was Yinka Shonibare MBE, whose sculpture *Sir Foster Cunliffe Playing* was displayed in the Norfolk House Music Room. The sculpture showed a headless archer dressed in period clothes made of 'wax printed' cloth for an African market. The sculpture made reference to a painting from 1787 by John Hoppner of Sir Foster Cunliffe III. Cunliffe was a keen archer (hence the pose) and founded the 'Society of the Royal British Bowmen'. The important thing about Cunliffe in this context are his ties to the transatlantic slave trade. Cunliffe was descended from a prominent Liverpool slave trading family. His grandfather, Foster Cunliffe I, had made the family fortune as a merchant and then as a ship owner. At the height of the family's success they owned outright or had a part share in 26 slave ships, but following the first Foster Cunliffe's death the family had withdrawn from active participation in the trade. (Rawley and Behrendt 2005:181-2)

Yinka Shonibare is a London-based artist who was born in the UK but grew up in Nigeria. He has frequently made use of 'African wax print' textiles in his work to question and subvert notions of Africa and African-ness. The 'wax prints' have come to be seen as archetypically (and stereotypically) African but their origins are much more complex with roots in Europe, Empire and Trade. By making use of these textiles Shonibare not only complicates the idea of African identity by questioning a cliché, he also highlights the extent to which that identity or at least our perception of it is rooted in our colonial and imperial past.

That this sculpture was displayed in the V&A which holds a collection of 'wax printed' cottons produced for sale in Africa adds another layer of complexity to the piece.

Interest in the fabrics, by an institution rooted in imperial history, as British rather than African provides a contrast with the view Shonibare has given elsewhere. The artist has stated,

African fabric: signifies African identity, rather like American Jeans (Levi's) are an indicator of trendy youth culture. In Brixton, African fabric is worn with pride amongst radical or cool youth. It manifests itself as a fashion accessory with Black British women in the head wrap form and it can also be found worn by Africans away from the home country. It becomes an aesthetics of defiance, an aesthetics of reassurance, a way of holding on to one's identity in a culture presumed foreign or different.

(<http://www.vam.ac.uk/vastatic/microsites/giveandtake/ai.html>)

Unfortunately none of the V&A's 'wax print' textiles were on display at the time of this exhibition.

## **Summary**

From 1947 the Circulation Department began to collect printed cottons designed for the West African market. These textiles were acquired as part of the Department's interest in contemporary design and were intended to be toured to art and design schools as a teaching tool for students. They proved to be extremely popular among colleges. The V&A began collecting these textiles as the industry was going into decline, the interest reflecting a concern about this.

## **Chapter Eight: The Circulation Department in the 1960s and 1970s**

The 1960s was a very active period at the V&A for collecting textiles from sub-Saharan Africa, particularly West Africa. It was predominantly, though not exclusively, the Circulation Department that acquired these objects. In addition, the Circulation Department also organised touring exhibitions of African material from other museums. It is not clear why there was increased interest in Africa at this time; perhaps the Circulation Department was encouraged by the evident popularity in art college of the 'wax prints' that they had acquired during the 1940s and 1950s (Chapter 7). Or perhaps they were responding to a new optimism and excitement about Africa as countries across the continent gained independence.

### **8.1 Textiles in the Collection**

The late 1950s and 1960s were a time of great political change in Sub-Saharan Africa as new African nations won independence from the European powers who had dominated them. Ghana, formally the Gold Coast, was the first country to win its independence from Britain in 1957 and by the end of 1964 only Southern Rhodesia remained under direct British control. These changes led to a renewed interest in and reassessment of many aspects of African culture and society.

Undoubtedly an important factor in the expansion of the African textile collection at this time was chance and opportunity. The Circulation Department was fortunate to acquire two large collections of textiles which happened to include significant numbers of African pieces. These are the Mary Kirby

bequest, which was donated to the V&A in 1964, and the Church Missionary Society collection which the department purchased in 1966 for £6.6.0. However, it would be wrong to imply that the Circulation Department was only interested in African textiles when they fell into their lap. They frequently bought African textiles from a variety of sources. There is also evidence of the department actively seeking out contemporary textiles in West Africa to purchase, specifically some adire textiles purchased in Nigeria, through Jane Barbour, a British woman working in Nigeria.

### **The Mary Kirby Bequest**

On 27 July 1964 '70 Miscellaneous textiles, part of the collection made by Miss Mary Kirby', were accessioned by the Circulation Department, 28 were either produced in West Africa or sold there. The textiles included a few pieces from Europe and the United States but the majority of the textiles were from West Africa, India and South America, in particular Mexico, Bolivia, Uruguay and Guatemala. In many ways this seemed a most uncharacteristic acquisition for the V&A which was not known for collecting artefacts from South America any more than it was for African textiles, but the Circulation Department was not a typical V&A department. The Textiles Department had also selected three pieces from Mary Kirby's collection, two European caps and a Soumak rug.

The museum first heard about the collection in 1963 when they received an undated letter from Hilda Breed, a hand-spinner and Weaver from Avery Hill College.



Dear Sir,

I have been left in joint charge with Miss Greta Moore of Newcastle of the collection of textiles made by the late Mary Kirby. They consist of a wide range of weaving embroidery and dyeing which she collected from Peru and Japan over a number of years. I understand from Mrs Kirby, Mary Kirby's mother, that she would like them put in the charge of the Victoria & Albert Museum since Miss Kirby worked there with her students for many years. ...

I must also say that I am in correspondence with the Hon. Rachel Kay Shuttleworth who would like to have it at Gawthorpe Hall.

...

Hilda Breed.

(V&A: MA/1/K756)

Although the letter only mentioned Peru and Japan the collection included textiles from all round the world. It is not clear why Breed chose to emphasise those two particular aspects of the collection. On 1 May 1963, she wrote again, apparently in response to a request from the museum for more details about the textiles, and supplied a list of the textiles which according to her own description was 'rather formidable' (V&A: MA/1/K756). The Circulation Department seem to have been excited by the list; across the top of the first page is a hand written note that reads 'Mrs Morris: Wow!' It is dated 3 May and initialled C.H. Carol Hogben, was the Keeper of Circulation and Barbara Morris was responsible for textiles within the department.

Although Breed initially wanted to keep Mary Kirby's collection together it was eventually decided that the V&A should be allowed to select the items it wanted, and the rest of the collection was sent to Gawthorpe Hall. Gawthorpe Hall, Lancashire, is now a National Trust property with a textile collection they describe in their own publicity material as 'the finest collection of textiles outside of the Victoria & Albert Museum'. During the 1960s Gawthorpe Hall was still

the home of the Shuttleworth family. It was Rachel K. Shuttleworth who collected the textiles which she intended not for Museum display but as practical study aids. In this regard the aims of the Gawthorpe Hall collection were similar to that of the Circulation Department. Shuttleworth had donated North African textiles to the V&A in the 1920s. This educational aspect seems to have been particularly important to Mary Kirby's trustees.

During their correspondence both the V&A staff and the trustees and relatives of the Mary Kirby Bequest emphasise the idea of the collection as an educational tool. Carol Hogben explained the role of the Circulation Department when he writes on 3 July 1964 to Mrs Eleanor Kirby (Mary Kirby's mother) to thank her for the textiles

I understood that ... your daughter had wished this museum to take from it as much material as it could put to good use... This department makes loans to art schools, Teachers training Colleges and University Departments all over the county on a very considerable scale (you may like to see the catalogue enclosed). These textiles would be of the greatest value in this context, and we have made a selection... which we should be most pleased to keep.... (V&A: MA/1/K756)

The importance attached to education is explained in the Director's official thank you letter to Eleanor Kirby when he writes that, 'I am pleased to think that this [inclusion in the Circulation Department] will form a particularly appropriate memorial tribute to your daughter's fine work as a teacher.' (V&A: MA/1/K756)

Mary Kirby had worked as a teacher of weaving at the Central School, London and it seems she intended her collection for practical teaching purposes. As well

as completed cloths the collection included weaving apparatus and textiles that were clearly works in progress. In addition to complete adire textiles the collection included a cloth that had been tied in preparation for dyeing, a cloth that had been tied and dyed but only partially unravelled, and a complete cloth with some raffia still sewn into it (V&A: MA/1/K756). This was the collection of somebody interested in the process of making textiles rather than just admiring them.

Mary Kirby also seems to have had a particular affection for the V&A as her mother's letter to Carol Hogben shows.

Dear Mr Hogben,

Thank you for your letter of 3<sup>rd</sup> July. I am very pleased to fall in your suggestions. I am sure that my daughter would have wished that her collection should be useful to...students. She had hoped to give lectures about them and her travels.

When she taught at at [sic] the Central School some years ago she used to bring her students to study at the Victoria & Albert Museum and she herself got much information for a book on textiles which she had partly written, but alas did not finish. It seems fitting that her collection should come to this museum.

Yours Sincerely

Eleanor Kirby.

(V&A: MA/1/K756)

The teaching of textiles seems to have been something of a passion for Mary Kirby. As well as making her collection, she entrusted the disposal of it to other textile teachers; Hilda Breed and Greta Moore.

Mary Kirby had had previous contact with the V&A in her role as a teacher at the Central School, London. On 16 February 1956 she had written to the V&A who were, at that time, disposing of a large number of items from the textile collection that they no longer felt to be useful.

Dear Mr Digby,  
 Thank you very much for your letter offering us weaving apparatus  
 from the museum.  
 I will be very pleased to accept this on behalf of the Central School.  
 ...  
 Yours Sincerely  
 Mary Kirby.  
 (V&A: MA/1/K756)

A note made in the file by Nathalie Rothstein in 1966 says that as well as teaching at the Central School in London, she also taught in West Africa (V&A: MA/1/K756). Although the files at the V&A do not specify where in West Africa she taught, it seems likely that was at the Kumasi Technical College as a number of the textiles in her collection were said to have been made there.

A memo to the Director on 11 August 1964 gave the Museum's official justification for the textiles. 'The material would be very useful to us especially for Circ. School Loans. It includes a lot of ethnographical material and was originally chosen for its design interest. If you agree perhaps you would sign the forms.'

(V&A: MA/1/K756). The reference here to both ethnographic material and design interest is noteworthy. They seem not to have been regarded as mutually exclusive by the Circulation Department. This is an important point because the divide between art and design and ethnography had been used to exclude African material from the museum since the 1920s.

### **Mary Kirby's textiles**

Mary Kirby's textiles included both European wax prints which continued to be exported to various West African countries and textiles produced in West Africa.

## **Strip Weaving**

A number of the textiles collected by Mary Kirby were examples of West African narrow strip weaving. She was a weaver herself and in 1955 had written a book called *Designing on the Loom*. It is therefore unsurprising that she should be interested in the weaving of any area she travelled to. Kirby's collection included two examples of Ewe cotton weaving, several types of blanket and some pieces woven at the Kumasi School of Technology

## **Ewe**

Despite having lived and worked at Kumasi, the Asante capital, Mary Kirby's collection did not contain any Asante strip weaving; instead there were examples of Ewe weaving. Venice Lamb wrote in 1975 that Asante weaving was generally done to specific orders rather than sold in a market and this may have made it harder to acquire than Ewe cloth which was sold in markets. (Lamb 1975:167) The Ewe are from the South Eastern part of Ghana's Volta region as well as Togo and Benin.

Two examples of Ewe narrow strip weaving were donated to the museum by Mary Kirby, Circ.321-1964 and Circ.322-1964 (which is now in Leeds Museum as LEEDM.F.1992.0004.0014). Circ.321.1964 is made up of nineteen strips of woven cotton with supplementary weft float patterns (Fig. 8.1). The strips are 280 cm long and the cloth is 190 cm wide in total. Most of the strips are decorated only with stripes but the nine central strips have a pattern of three leaves which alternate with 'colour blocks'. These 'colour block's are not made up of solid colour but small alternating squares of two colours or two different

shades of the same colour. They appear to be made of mercerised cotton giving them a shinier appearance. The leaves on each strip are all the same colour and the strips alternate green and yellow leaves. There are four colour blocks on each strip, three are the same colour. The patterned area covers a rectangle of 92 cm by 51.5 cm.



Fig. 8.1: Narrow strip woven cotton, Ewe, Ghana, mid-twentieth century 280 cm by 190 cm. V&A: Circ.321-1964

It is often said the supplementary weft float patterns in Ewe cloths have links to proverbs and therefore meanings are associated with them. Agbenyega Adedze listed some of them in his essay for the catalogue of *Wrapped in Pride* an exhibition held at the UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History in Los Angeles in 1998. He defined the meaning of a leaf design as follows ‘I will not survive if I am plucked from a tree (meaning I am one who depends on others).’ (Adedze 1998: 138). Lamb has warned that although:

It has been suggested that the representational inlay designs which are such a feature of [these] cloths are linked ... to the corpus of Ewe

proverbs...The weavers themselves, however, do not see things in quite this way. To them the repertoire of pictures is part of their craft, having its origins in the distant past and preserved as part of their group memory.  
(Lamb 1975: 197-200)

The second example of Ewe weaving (LEEDM.F.1992.0004.0014) (Fig. 8.2) consists of only fourteen strips and is smaller than the other one, being only 128 cm by 191.4 cm. It is made up of green rectangles which alternate with dark reddish brown ones. When this textile arrived in the V&A it was described as a 'Cotton garment woven in strips with stars and diamond motifs added in embroidery.' (V&A Central Inventory Circ.322-1964). This is inaccurate, as the star and diamond motifs are supplementary weft patterns, produced during the weaving of the strip. The patterns stand proud of the cotton more than the patterns on the other cloth which may have caused the confusion. They are spread evenly across the cloth, alternating one motif on one strip and two on the next.



Fig. 8.2: Narrow Strip weaving, Ewe, Ghana 128 cm x 191.5 cm.  
LEEDM.F.1992.0004.0014

### **Kumasi College of Technology**

The Mary Kirby bequest also included five similar textiles (Circ.316-1964 to Circ.321-1964) which were described in the V&A's central inventory as 'Woven at the Kumasi College of Technology.' Only two of these remain in the V&A collection (Circ.317-1964 and Circ.318-1964). Of the other three two went to the Horniman Museum (Circ. 316-1924 Circ.320-1964) and another to Leeds Museum (Circ.319-1964). The two in the V&A (Fig. 8.3) and the one in the Leeds Museum collection are all very similar. They have been woven in wool and cotton and are 24.5 cm wide. The stripe pattern is the same. The main colour is white with a pattern of black and red stripes at the ends, with only black stripes in the centre. There are two mustard yellow stripes about a quarter of the way down from each end. There is some variation in the length: 253 cm (Circ.317-1964), 261 cm (Circ.318-1964) and 268 cm (LEEDM.F.1992.0004.0017). A label attached to both of the examples in the V&A reads 'Strip, woven in wool and cotton, part of a blanket, woven at the Kumasi College of Technology. West African (Gold Coast); contemporary'. The V&A use the term 'Gold Coast' even though Ghana had gained independence seven years earlier in 1957. It is not clear where the V&A got the information that these strips had been produced at the Kumasi Technical College from and they appear to be typical of blankets woven by the Fulani people making it more likely that these strips were produced in Mali.



The Kumasi College of Technology was established in 1951 by a Government Ordinance and opened officially on 22nd January 1952 when 200 Teacher Training students transferred from Achimota, to form the nucleus of the new College. The Kumasi College of Technology became a University and renamed the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology by an Act of Parliament on 22 August 1961 ([www.knust.edu.gh](http://www.knust.edu.gh)).



Fig. 8.3: Woven wool and cotton strip, said to have been woven at the Kumasi College of Technology, mid nineteenth century. V&A: Circ.317-1964 and Circ.318-1964

In 1995 the catalogue to accompany *The Art of African Textiles; Technology, Tradition and Lurex* exhibition held in London contained a piece by Atta Kwami entitled *Textile Design in Ghana*: Extracts from a report which mentions that ‘Since 1972, the Technology Consultancy Centre of the University of Science and Technology, Kumasi has been offering training and equipment for broadloom weavers.’ (Kwami 1995: 43)

## Blankets

Mary Kirby's collection also included a number of strip woven blankets from different parts of West Africa. The largest was Circ.313-1964 (now LEEDM.F.1992.0004.0021) a khasa or Fulani blanket 166cm by 412 cm (Fig. 8.4). This cloth is made of seven strips each about 23cm wide, the warp is cotton and most of the weft is wool. Six of the strips are similarly patterned with geometric designs of rectangles and lozenges in blue, brown and orange. Care has been taken to match the patterns across the strips. The final strip is made of blue and white weft based stripes. The striped end has cotton tabs attached to it that could be used for hanging the textile.



Fig. 8.4: Woven wool and cotton blanket, Mali, 166cm by 412cm.  
LEEDM.F.1992.0004.0021

### **European Produced**

Mary Kirby's collection reflects a wide ranging interest in many different types of textiles. Not only did she collect hand-crafted textiles from all round the world her collection also included some factory produced items, specifically European produced 'wax prints' designed for the West African market. The bequest included only ten textiles of this sort they are important because they reflect the momentous changes in West Africa and Ghana during the late 1950s and Early 1960s.

The textile that deals most clearly with the events of this period is Circ.299-1964 (Fig. 8.5). It was described in the Circulation Department register as a 'Printed cotton textile for the West African market. English (Manchester).

Contemporary.' The cloth is printed to look as though it has been unevenly dyed with blue, white and yellow and then had a black pattern stencilled over it.





Fig. 8.5: Printed cotton for the West African market, 1950s. V&A: Circ.299-1964

The pattern is made up of evenly spaced rows of small stars interrupted by an image of a hand, the Ghana Coat of Arms and the motto 'Freedom in my hand I bring'. This textile was produced either in the build up to independence as a form of protest or after independence to commemorate the event. The decision on the final form of the Ghanaian coat of arms was arrived at quite late so it is more likely this textile was produced after independence. Every aspect of the pattern on this textile refers to Ghanaian independence.



Fig. 8.6: Printed cotton for the West African market (detail), 1950s. V&A:

Circ.299-1964

The Ghana Coat of Arms was designed to celebrate Independence and represent the new nation of Ghana. The official government explanation for the Coat of Arms explains that the central shield depicts a linguist staff to represent local administration, a castle for national government, a palm tree to show agricultural wealth and a mine shaft for mineral wealth (Ghanaian Government Website). The motto reads 'Freedom and Justice. At the centre of the shield sits a lion representing Great Britain and Ghana's ongoing relationship with the former colonial power through the commonwealth.

The Eagles holding the shield are intended to have a protective role while the five pointed star above the shield represents the star of African freedom. The



star, which is also the centrepiece of the Ghanaian flag, was a very important symbol not only of freedom but also of pan-African ideals. The importance of this symbol is emphasised by the way that it is picked up by the other five pointed stars that make up the background pattern.

The textile trader has clearly stamped his own logo across the design suggesting that this particular piece may have been a sample. A number of the European produced textiles in Mary Kirby's collection have trade stamps on them; perhaps they were available at a cut price because of this. The stamp is for the trading company A. G. Leventis. Leventis was a trader of Cypriot origin who had started his career in West Africa as a produce buyer. He bought African cotton for export and his original venture, in the late 1930s, was partly financed by the Lancashire Textile industry. However, by this time, the late 1950s or early 1960s his main business was merchandise trading at which he was extremely successful. This textile celebrating Ghanaian independence from Britain was manufactured in Manchester and sold by a Cypriot trader. Incidentally, Cyprus was also part of the British Empire and was made independent in 1960, three years after Ghana.

Another cloth in the Kirby bequest (Fig. 8.7) also shows the five pointed stars, which might appear innocuous but in the context of Ghana at this time and with the gold colour that was one of the pan-African colours they are significant.



Fig. 8.7: Printed cotton for the West African market, 1950s. V&A: Circ.297-1964

Another interesting aspect of the textiles collected by Mary Kirby is that many of these European produced textiles are deliberately reproducing African patterns, and in some cases the texture of the printed cloth itself has been treated to make the textile seem more like the hand-crafted African produced textiles they are trying to mimic. It is important to remember that this may be due to Mary Kirby's own taste in textiles; she may have preferred to buy things that showed strong links to local traditions, rather than part of a wider trend at the time.

Circ. 298-1964 is a cotton print that has been made to look like a strip woven ikat textile (Fig. 8.8). It has also been textured in a similar way to seersucker in an



attempt to not only copy the look of strip weaving but its textural qualities as well.



Fig. 8.8: Woven cotton, mid nineteenth century. V&A: Circ.298-1964

Another textile given to the museum on behalf of Mary Kirby shows not only an effort to copy both the look and the feel of locally produced textiles but also to emphasise these factors in the marketing of the textile. In this instance the textile has been designed to look like Nigerian adire cloth, a form of resist dyed indigo cotton that was extremely popular and fashionable during the middle of the nineteenth century. The cloth also has a slightly rumpled texture associated with certain types of adire. In adire cloth this rumpled effect occurs due to the resist dyeing process; the cloth has to be stitched or tied so tightly to resist the dye it



interferes with the structure of the warp and weft and alters the texture of the cloth. With a factory printed cloth there is nothing to cause this alteration in texture so it must have been altered deliberately by the manufacturer in order to make it seem more like a real adire cloth. The label on this cloth reads ‘Adire Dara-Dara, Guaranteed Real Indigo Print’ (Fig. 8.9). The trader is trying to market this cloth as adire, and is emphasising its similarity to that cloth by referring to ‘real indigo’. Clearly the links to a West African tradition and an ‘authentic’ West African product were seen as selling points.



Fig. 8.9: Printed cotton for the West African market, 1950s. V&A: Circ.295-1964

### Jane Barbour

The second significant acquisition of African textiles made by the Circulation Department during the 1960s was the purchase of eight adire textiles from

Ibadan in Nigeria in 1965 through Jane Barbour. These textiles were acquired in a very different way to the Mary Kirby bequest; they were bought for the museum as opposed to being acquired as part of a bequest. However, Both Mary Kirby and Jane Barbour were British women working in West African further education institutions, and the textiles in both collections reflect the place and time they were made or bought.

Although the textiles did not arrive in the museum until 1965, it appears they were originally sought in 1963 when the paperwork file for this purchase was first opened. Again it seems to be Hogben who was instrumental in this acquisition. In a note where the file about these pieces should be, Hogben explains that the original paperwork relating to this acquisition has gone missing and summarises the story so far.

This file has been mislaid. It originated with a letter from myself to Mr Bernard Fagg in Nigeria requesting him to acquire some textiles on our behalf. He put us in touch with a Mrs Jane Barbour who offered to meet this request if we were able to furnish some money in advance. This proper but unusual procedure was agreed and a payment of fifteen pounds was made on account. She subsequently sent a group of textiles pieces, reporting that she still had a balance of cash in hand and asking for guidance. I encouraged her to proceed and buy one or two others, within a few further pounds but without a further advance payment.  
(V&A: MA/1/B8)

In 1963 Bernard Fagg, who is mentioned at the start of the note, became curator of the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, noted for its ethnographic collection. Previously Bernard Fagg had worked for the Department of Antiquities of the colonial administration in Nigeria. He had helped to found the National Museum in Jos, Nigeria's first public museum, in 1952 and had later run it. It is not clear whether he was contacted while still in Nigeria or after his appointment to the

Pitt Rivers because the original letter with the date is missing. However, he was clearly a good person to go to for help relating to Nigerian artefacts.

It is not clear why the Circulation Department sought out these cloths, which would have been common in Nigeria at this time. All the cloths Barbour bought for the museum are adire cloths, but because the original paper work is missing it is impossible to know whether the V&A specifically requested adire or just wanted Nigerian textiles in general. On 10 March 1965 Jane Barbour wrote to the museum offering to buy other sorts of Nigerian textile.

Dear Mr Hogben,  
 ... I come home in June and will bring £7 of cloth with me but if you'd like more, please let me know which kinds you would like. I could also buy you locally woven cloth, i.e. Yoruba – or when we go north in May Bida cloth – broad-loom – hand-woven – very attractive – or Northern woven cloth from Kano or “adire” cloth from Kano.,.  
 Yours Sincerely Jane Barbour  
 (V&A: MA/1/B8)

Again, there is no recorded response from the V&A but these other kinds of cloth are not bought for the museum so it seems the answer was no.

Adire is a Yoruba word for ‘tie and dye’. Adire cloths are made throughout Yorubaland which is in South West Nigeria, but the main centre of production was the city of Abeokuta. Ibadan was also a large centre of production and specialised particularly in hand painted cloths (Picton and Mack 1989: 155). All of the examples bought for the museum come from Ibadan where Barbour worked at the university.

Adire had been popular in the 1930s, then fallen out of fashion and by the 1960s was experiencing a resurgence. Adire was extremely popular in the 1960s and widely available. It was not a prestigious cloth, part of its appeal and ubiquity was due to its affordability. This African fashion was reliant on the easy availability of cheap, European produced cotton.

Along with the letter quoted above Barbour sent some typewritten pages about the production of adire. Barbour's notes run to five pages but it appears that they may originally have been longer, as they end rather abruptly, but only five pages remain in the files. These notes of Barbour's are an important source as they provide one woman's eye-witness account of the state of adire production during the 1960s and its popularity.

Adire cloths in the 1960s were usually made up of two and a half yard lengths of factory produced cotton shirting which are sewn together to form a shape that is roughly square (Stanfield 1971: 9). One adire was the right size to be used as a wrapper. However, in the 1960s the cloths were being used in a greater variety of ways as Nancy Stanfield explained: 'Since Independence in 1960 they have grown ever more popular and are made up into fashionable European styled garments or worn as traditional wrappers, head-ties and cover cloths. But the majority of adires are still worn as wrappers.' (Stanfield 1971:9) This account is backed up by the notes Jane Barbour sent to the V&A with the textiles.

Recently there has been a new development. Europeans and educated Nigerian men started to wear shirts made of adire, especially in the pattern described in No. 4 [Circ 591-1965]. This 'caught on' and during the last year it has been seen everywhere,

both as shirts and as the loose buba and sokoto, which are a loose tunic and trousers to match. This phase is now coming to an end. It is unusual to see an educated woman wearing an adire cloth, though most of them do have one or two.

(V&A: Textile Department files Circ. 591-1965)

The emphasis on 'new developments' is important. Adire cloths did not represent a static tradition; they were the result of changing fashions with different types of cloth and various patterns superseding one another in popularity. Barbour backed this up when she refers to one of the cloths as the 'cloth of the year (1964)' (V&A: Textile Department files Circ. 591-1965).

Barbour seems to have tried to include for the museum examples of all the main types of adire and her notes describe the different methods used for producing these different types of cloths. It is worth noting that Barbour was something of an expert about adire cloths. In 1971 she co-edited a book entitled *Adire cloth in Nigeria* (Barbour and Simmonds 1971) published by the Ibadan University Press. Jane Barbour was also responsible for purchasing the better known and more extensive collections of adire textiles for the British Museum in London and the Smithsonian Institute in Washington DC which also has an archive of her photographs.

In her notes Jane Barbour divided the adire into two types. 'First a group which includes various ways of tying and sewing, or a combination of these. This group can be recognised at once because the pattern is seen on both sides of the cloth. The second group is '*adire eleko*' and means cloth made with starch.' Barbour subdivided the first group into four kinds, raffia tying, machine sewing,

hand sewing and folding and tying. She provided examples of each kind except hand sewn.

In adire oniko raffia (iko in Yoruba) is used as the resisting agent. Jane Barbour's notes explain that

Small stones or seeds are tied in the cloth so that when the raffia is untied a small circle is left in white. These can be scattered over the cloth, or in a continuous spiral. To give a larger area of white, a point of cloth is raised and the cloth below it bound tight. These appear as white round areas with blue radii. They can be of any size. An attractive pattern consists of one very large one. A typical pattern produced in this way is know [sic] as 'moon and stars', the moons being the large white areas and the stars the little circles. Two years ago this was the most popular pattern in Ibadan. It is still produced but on a diminished scale.

(V&A: Textile Department Records)



Fig. 8.10: Adire oniko, indigo resist dyed cotton, Ibadan, Nigeria, 1960s. V&A: Circ.592-1965

There are several standard combinations of small and large circles with names that describe the appearance of the cloth. Circ.592-1965 has a pattern known as



Olosupaeleso – moons and fruits – and is made up of five rows of large circles with the intervening area filled with small circles (Fig. 8.10). It is important to be careful about naming patterns and attributing meanings to them as these changes over both space and time as Barbour explains.

To some informants a small circle for instance is just a decorative small circle whereas, to another it is a small fruit (eleso) and to others the method of preparation. Three generations, at least have passed since the beginning of many of the patterns so it is not now possible to know how the originator saw it. This paper only deals therefore with how people interpret the patterns today. Every cloth has its own name and amongst long distance trading there cannot be ambiguity on this score. A maker of adire eleko in Ibadan however would not necessarily know the exact name of a tied cloth from Abeokuta, whereas a woman trader might be more accurate. (Barbour 1971: 51)



Fig. 8.11: Adire indigo resist dyed cotton, Ibadan, Nigeria, 1960s. V&A: Circ.591-1965

Another common pattern was made by folding and tying the fabric, Circ. 591-1965 is an example of this (Fig. 8.11). Jane Barbour explained the creation of this pattern as follows.

Folding and tying. The cloth is folded from corner to corner like a concertina. Then it is bound very tightly at various points along the cloth. There are two types of pattern produced like this, one where the cloth is bound two or three times in broad strips. This produces a very striking pattern in the shape of a diamond in alternating broad bands of blue and white. It is much more commonly produced in narrow bands. This might be describes as the ‘cloth of the year (1964)’. It is seen everywhere on both men and women. It is comparatively quick and easy to prepare therefore can be sold more cheaply.  
(V&A: Textile Department Records)

Circ.591.1965 is an example of the ‘more commonly produced’ narrow band type. Like the previous textile it can be produced cheaply and quickly with multiple cloths being produced at once by stacking cottons on top of each other. This easy and cheap production allowing for a quick turnover was one of the keys to *adire*’s popularity and resurgence at this time. It was not a prestigious cloth but an everyday one that responded to changing fashions, Barbour referring to it as ‘cloth of the year’ backs this up.

It was precisely this fashionable and changing aspect of *adire* cloths that lead to their decline. Other fashions took over. There is a hint of what is to come in Barbour’s notes. ‘Another recent development is the dyeing of cloth with *adire* patterns, but in colours other than Indigo. This is done in Lagos.’ (V&A: Textile Department files Circ. 591-1965). Nancy Stanfield also makes reference to the changes to *adire* that were making way for the next fashion in the mid 1960s ‘From 1964 since fast dyed cloths were made in red, green, and other colours as well as in fast blue. These cloths were done in traditional folded and tied



designs, but to-day, 1968, variations are being introduced by another set of designers and two or more colours are dyed on the same cloth.' (Stanfield 1971: 9)

The textiles purchased by Jane Barbour for the V&A also included an example of patterns made using a sewing machine (Circ. 594-1965). Her notes described the making of this as follows:

Sewing with a machine. The cloth is folded and long narrow pleats are made which receive no dye. These lines can be horizontal or vertical, or both, in which case a sort of tartan pattern is produced. They can also be sewn diagonally in which case the pattern appears as diamonds.  
(V&A: Textile Department Records)

The example in the museum collection has both horizontal and vertical lines.

Unlike

other forms of adire men are involved in this process as they do the machine sewing. Barbour wrote in her notes for the V&A that:

Most of the processes are carried out by women and girls. These skills are handed down within the family. Dyeing is an entirely female craft. Men do the sewing with a machine and they cut the stencils. They also apply the starch to the stencils. Small boys help with tying of raffia. There is often a man in charge of a compound'  
(V&A: Textile Department Records)

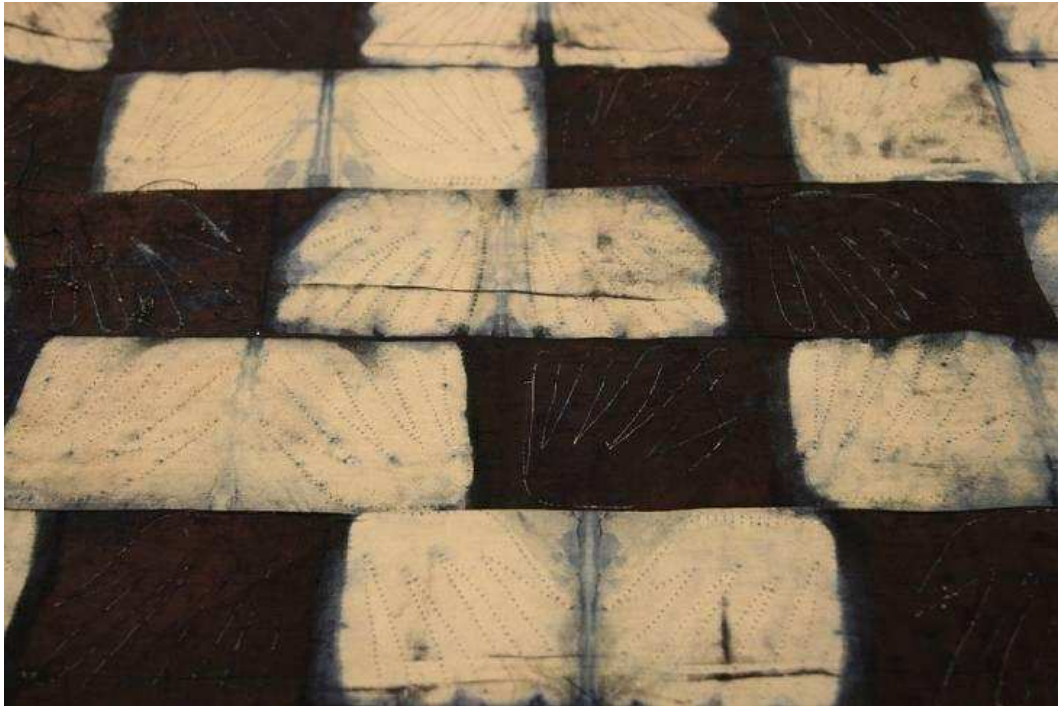


Fig. 8.12: Adire, indigo resist dyed cloth, Nigeria, 1960s. V&A:Circ.593-1965

A second cloth also featured some machine stitching (Circ.593-1965, Fig.8.12). In this example the factory produced cloth that has been cut into strips. There are eight strips about 19 cm wide which have been sewn together to form a cloth that is the standard size for adire cloth. The cloth has been dyed with uneven alternating blue and white squares. There is a pattern of hands that has been stitched into some of the squares. The hands are rough outline drawings and cannot be seen clearly from a distance. Although this was bought for the V&A by Barbour none of her notes refer specifically to it.

### **Adire Eleko**

Jane Barbour also supplied the museum with four examples of adire eleko, that is adire cloth where the resist used is starch (eko in Yoruba). In Barbour's notes adire eleko is further broken down into two categories; free hand painted and stencilled. She supplied two examples of stencilled patterns and two examples of

hand drawn cloths. However, when this research was begun it seemed that one of the stencilled cloths, both of the hand-drawn cloths and two others were missing. They were not listed on the V&A's Collection Information System (CIS). They were listed in the departmental registers which showed they had come into the museum, this also contained Jane Barbour's notes about them. This proved that they had been in the Museum. It was unclear whether or not they still were in the collection and if so where they were located. It seemed they had been lost forever, but in 2008, during the department's annual inventory one of the pieces, along with some examples of adire purchased from galleries, was found in one of the textile store rooms by Daniel Milford Cottam, an assistant curator in the Department of Furniture, Textiles and Fashion. He was able to identify them because they still had their original museum labels. Another set of adire cloths, including five bought for the museum by Barbour was found during the 2010 inventory, meaning that the V&A now has the complete set of textiles sent to it by Barbour. This last find was particularly exciting because some of the cloths are of a very high quality, some are signed by the maker and the variety and creativity of these cloths is now represented more fully in the museum.



Fig. 8.13: Adire eleko, indigo resist dyed cloth, Nigeria, 1960s. V&A: Circ.589-1965

Jane Barbour bought two examples of Stencilled adire for the museum and wrote the following about them.

Painting over a stencil. This method is very much quicker [than painting free-hand]. The stencils are cut from zinc or lead sheets that have been used for packing things such as matches. Stencils are used for a wide variety of patterns. Some are representational like the coronation pattern which shows a couple wearing crowns in the centre with various animals and figures at the sides. Or it can be a simple decorative pattern which repeats itself. With some stencil patterns a comb-like tool is used to scrape away the starch.

In the example above (Fig. 8.13) marks are visible in the diamonds and circles where a comb has been used to scrape away the thick starch.

Barbour also supplied cloths to the V&A that were examples of the free-hand painted adire that Ibadan specialised in. Starch is used for the painting and is applied to one side of the cloth only using chicken feathers, the midrib of a palm leaf and a matchstick for different thicknesses of line. The hand painted cloths

were usually divided into squares and rectangles and then filled in with hand drawn patterns and pictures (Picton and Mack 1989: 155-156). The labour intensive nature of the hand painting means that these cloths were not produced in the large numbers that the tie-dyed, stitched or stencilled cloths were. Barbour wrote that 'this method ... is a 'luxury' cottage industry with seldom more than one or two girls painting the cloths in any one house.' (Barbour 1971: 53). These cloths also don't seem to have been subject to quite the same forces of fashion as the more quickly produced cloths. Barbour wrote of one of the patterns (Ibadandun – see below) 'The surprising feature is how little change there is rather than how much. The same objects continue to be associated in each square. For instance the Muslim prayer board...is always accompanied by two forks.' (Barbour 1971: 54)

In Barbour's notes she refers to Ibadandun and Olokun as the two most common sorts of free-hand painted adire. She provided the V&A with an example of each of these cloths.

Circ.587-1965 is an example of the Olokun (sea goddess) pattern and has attached to it a label made by the Circulation Department that reads; "Adire eleko" (indigo dyed starch resist) Olokun. A traditional design: Olokun. The starch resist is hand painted on the cotton cloth, which is then dyed.' Barbour explains the name of the cloth. 'In this context it [Olokun] means life is sweet, for Olokun is the god or goddess of the sea. This starts a train of ideas; money comes from over the sea, money is sweet and so life is sweet.' (Barbour 1971:54) Barbour defines the Olokun pattern as made up of two rows of five large squares with rectangles at each end (as if one of the squares had been halved lengthwise)



and a row of twelve smaller squares at the base of the cloth. Picton and Mack have written that the content of the squares is constant (Picton and Mack 1989: 156) but Barbour says that the pattern is defined by the configuration of the squares and rectangles and the presence of a four legged stool in the central square. She also says that it was common to find 'OK' written in one of the squares but that some people felt this was vulgar. (Barbour 1971: 54). The V&A cloth has the 'OK' on it in several places. Other designs featured on the V&A's Olokun are frogs, scorpions, herons, birds, crowns, combs, spoons, forks, lizards, snakes drums, pipes and things used for washing clothes.



Fig. 8.14: Adire eleko, Olokun. Indigo resist dyed cotton, Ibadan, Nigeria, 1960s. V&A: Circ.587-1965



Fig. 8.15: Adire eleko, Ibadandun. Indigo resist dyed cotton, Ibadan, Nigeria, 1960s. V&A: Circ.588-1965

The second hand-drawn cloth supplied by Barbour has the Ibadandun pattern on it. Barbour writes that Ibadandun means ‘Ibadan is sweet or pleasant’ (Barbour 1971: 54) and Picton and Mack have translated it as ‘Ibadan is a happy place’ (Picton and Mack 1989: 155). Once again the pattern is defined by the configuration of squares and by the presence of a specific pattern in at least one of the squares. This time there are four rows of seven squares on each half of the cloth. The pattern that gives the cloth its names contains pillars alternating with spoons. The pillars represent the façade of Mapo Hall. Picton and Mack explain the relevance of Hall: ‘Mapo Hall is a neo-classical style building on a hill in the middle of Ibadan, which serves as a town hall. It was built around 1945 by the famous Taffy Jones, himself a pillar of public building and works in Western Nigeria.’ (Picton and Mack 1989: 156) The reasoning behind the spoons is unclear but they do provide a pleasing aesthetic balance to the design. The pillars and spoons have another useful function according to Barbour. ‘One way of assessing the quality of the cloth is by counting the number of spoons. Top quality cloths have five spoons, the average four and the least good, three (‘for the tourists’ as one informant mentioned)’ (Barbour 1971: 54). The cloth

supplied to the V&A has six spoons (Fig. 8.16) and is therefore a very good cloth; this is also made clear by the clarity and quality of the rest of the drawing.

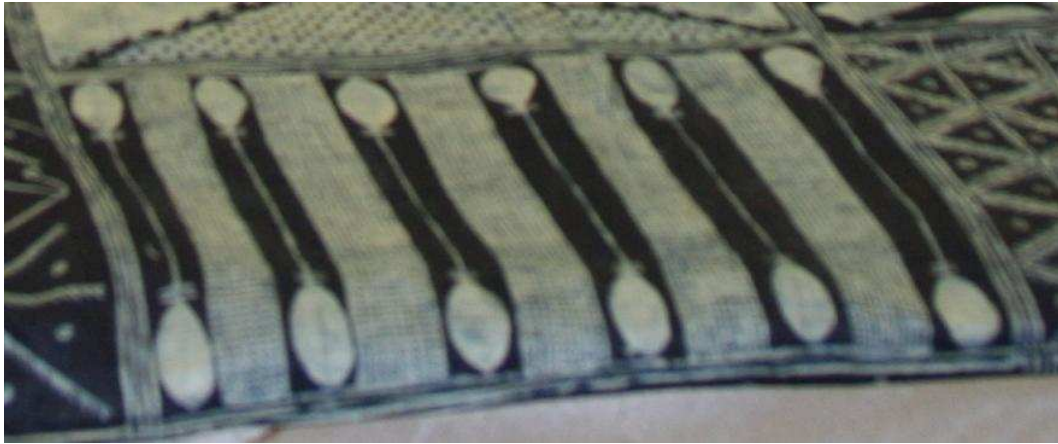


Fig. 8.16: Adire eleko, Ibadandun. Pillars and spoons. Indigo resist dyed cotton, Ibadan, Nigeria, 1960s. V&A: Circ.588-1965

The cloth appears to have been signed; it was not uncommon for good quality cloths to be signed on the back on the folded over edge. These signatures are sometimes symbols rather than names. This cloth has a clear picture of a folded parasol on its underside (Fig. 8.17). This sign also appears on the front of the cloth in many of the squares mixed in with the other patterns. The presence of the 'signature' on the front of the cloth suggests that this was a well known maker and having a cloth made by her was worth boasting about. It may be possible from this to find the name of the maker of this cloth from this symbol.





Fig. 8.17: Adire eleko, Ibadandun. Indigo resist dyed cotton, Ibadan, Nigeria, 1960s. V&A: Circ.588-1965

### **Purchases from galleries**

The Circulation Department also bought African textiles from galleries, in particular Primavera and Berkeley Galleries, which were both based in London, but also on one occasion from an H.J. Kouw in Amsterdam. These purchases included buying additional examples of types of textile already in the collection and also cloths not otherwise represented in the collection.

The V&A purchased nine African textiles in total from Berkeley Gallery, 20 Davies St, London. They also bought a number of other items from the gallery between 1949 and 1968 including stoneware, Chinese Brocade and Japanese textiles. The gallery was run by William Ohly, a collector of ‘ethnographic art’. It is through this gallery that the museum acquired pottery made by Michael

Cardew while he was in Abuja, Nigeria and also by Lali Kwadi. These objects were acquired by the Circulation Department in 1958. (V&A: MA/1/B1204)

On 14 April 1967 the V&A archive records the purchase of fourteen textiles for £75. Eight come from West Africa and the rest from India and Indonesia. Seven of the textiles are listed as coming from Nigeria while the final one comes from Ghana (V&A: MA/1/B1204). This is an example of Asante weaving and is now in the Leeds Museum but was previously in the V&A as Circ.576-1967 (LEEDM.F.1992.0004.0006, Fig. 8.18). It is 8.7 cm wide and 295 cm long and represents a single strip, several of which would have been stitched together to make a cloth. It is predominantly made of blue cotton with weft stripes in yellow, white, black, magenta and green with additional geometric supplementary weft float patterns. The fact that they purchased a single strip rather than a complete cloth shows an interest in how things are made and emphasises the Circulation Department's educational role. The form on which these purchases are listed has 'School loans' written across the back of it, showing clearly that these textiles were always intended to be toured to art colleges rather than regional museums.

Three of the textiles acquired from Berkeley galleries were further examples of adire cloth (Circ569.1967 to Circ.571-1967), two were examples of Ikat (Circ.566-1967 and Circ.567-1967), one listed as tie and dye and the Sudanese Jubba (Circ. 563-1967) discussed in Chapter 5.



Fig. 8.18: Woven cotton strip, Asante, Ghana, mid twentieth century.  
LEEDM.F.1992.0004.0006

In 1968 another African textile was bought from Berkeley galleries, also listed as Nigerian. It is a wool blanket woven in six strips; it is 122 cm wide and 251 cm long. It is predominantly white with black, brown and yellow patterns. Care has been taken to match the patterns on the individual strips. It is a Fulani blanket and although the Fulani are most strongly associated with Mali they do also live in Nigeria, so it is possible this blanket was made there.



Fig. 8.19: Khasa, Strip woven wool blanket, Mali, twentieth century. V&A:  
Circ.120-1968

An object registration form dated 1 May 1968 lists six textiles that were bought by Betty O'Looney, a curator in the Circulation Department while she was on a trip to Amsterdam. Five of the six pieces were listed as 'Javanese Batik' (Circ.498-1968 to Circ.502-1968). The final one, Circ.497-1968 was listed as '1 West African textile (Senufo)' It is an example of a different kind of resist dyed textile which uses mud. The Department paid £8 for it, making it the most expensive item; the batiks were all priced at between £2.5s and £3. It was said to have come from 'north Ivory Coast'. However, it appears to be a bogolanfini made by the Bamana people of Mali and is not like a Senufo mud cloth. Inaccurate attribution of West African cloths seems to have been a problem for the Circulation Department which had no experts in this area on its staff. As in this case information provided by textile dealers was often assumed to be true. It



is made of strips of woven cotton sewn together before the cloth was decorated and is 148.5 cm long and 95 cm wide. As discharge-dyed mud cloth it would have represented a technique not found elsewhere in the collection.



Fig. 8.20: Bogolanfini, Discharge dyed cotton, probably Mali, twentieth century 148.5cm by 95cm. V&A: Circ.497-1968

### **The Church Missionary Society**

In 1966 the Circulation Department, the Textiles Department and the India Section of the V&A all purchased textiles from the Church Missionary Society. The India Section received 52 pieces, the largest selection. Surprisingly missionaries had not previously contributed to the V&A collection of African textiles. The museum was given or sold material by both traders and colonial or military personnel, but not missionaries who represented the third major group of British nationals involved in Africa during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Perhaps the fact that missionary societies had their own collections of African artefact is an explanation for this.

The Church Missionary Society was founded in 1799 and in 1804 sent its first missionaries to West Africa. The society continued to send missionaries to Africa and many other parts of the world and to train local clergy to start their own missions. The society continues its work to this day. In 1966 the society moved its headquarters from East London to a new location on Waterloo Road and it is likely that this was the impetus for them to get rid of some of the artefacts they had collected over the years.

Their first contact was with the Textiles Department. On 17 November 1965 an 'Objects Submitted on Approval for Purchase' was filled out which listed nineteen textiles including eight from West Africa. The other textiles were Chinese, Persian and Palestinian (V&A: MA/1/C1436). Curators from the Department had previously visited the Society to view and make a selection of some textiles. An undated memo in the file from Donald King, the Deputy Keeper of Textiles, to Madeleine Ginsburg, a curator in the textiles department, raises a couple of questions in relation to the textiles.

1. Do we want any of the costumes in the Palestine exhibition?...
2. We are asked to submit a list of all objects which we want to CMS stating the sum which we are prepared to pay for them. I told Miss Randolph that this was the first intimation that I had received that payment was involved and that the V&A would not be prepared to pay more than a very modest sum. She said that CMS was very unlikely to quibble about the amount. Wd you pl. show the things to Mr Digby and ask whether he is prepared to spend a small sum on them. I should have thought that £20 or £30 should cover the lot, including the two Palestinian costumes.  
(V&A: MA/1/C1436)

The textile department paid £25 for the selection of textiles. The African textiles included three examples of strip woven cloth and five cotton hats. Only one of

the strip woven cloths remains in the collection. It is made up of fourteen woven strips. The cloth is 208 cm long and 142 cm wide. Each is made up of a blue and white striped section, a purple ikat strip and a plain brown section.



Fig. 8.21: Narrow strip weaving, Yoruba, Nigeria. V&A: T.244-1966

The Circulation Department did not make their selection until January the following year as a letter from Carol Hogben Deputy Keeper of Circulation to the Church Missionary Society dated 20 January 1966 indicates.

You were kind enough recently to allow Mrs O’Looney and myself to select nineteen West African garments etc., plus two “charms” from your store. You considered that seven pounds ten shillings might be suggested as a reasonable price for the lot. We have now been able to examine them in detail and wish to purchase only fifteen of the textiles and the charms.

I have therefore asked for the four other pieces to be returned to you and should be glad to know whether six guineas would seem an appropriate price for the things we have kept? They are certainly items we should be very pleased to have in our collection.  
(V&A: MA/1/C1436)

In contrast to the Textile Department, apart from one jacket from Palestine, all the pieces were thought to be West African. One of the hand-woven cloths has since been reattributed to the Toda people of Tamil Nadu by Veronica Johnstone after she accessioned it to Leeds Museum (LEEDM.F.1992.0004.0020). The types of textiles acquired by the Circulation Collection are also different to those chosen by the Textiles Department. Although they accessioned eleven pieces of hand-woven cloth similar to those accessioned by the Textiles Department they didn't acquire any hats. They also selected a pair of trousers and two men's robes. Again, most of these pieces are no longer in the collection; three were transferred to Leeds City Museum and the Horniman Museum in 1989.

The Textiles Department interest in the Church Missionary Society textiles shows that although it was mainly the Circulation Department who were interested in African textiles they were not entirely excluded from the Textiles Department.

### **Use of the African textiles**

As previously noted, as well as collecting textiles produced in Manchester for the West African market, it was also the circulation collection who took most interest in acquiring textiles produced in sub-Saharan Africa. Like with the 'wax prints' it is possible to some degree to trace what happened to these textiles through the prospectuses produced by the V&A to inform lenders about what was available to them. The Mary Kirby textiles appear in the Loan Collections 1968-70 prospectus listed as follows:

176. West African Textiles



Piece cottons and garments, variously dyed, painted and woven,  
principally from the Mary Kirby collection; lent loose in fibre boxes.  
(V&A: MA/17/1)

It is possible that the textiles were offered before this, but because no brochures between 1964 (when the textiles arrived in the museum) and 1968 have been archived it is difficult to know for sure. Set 176 was also offered in the 1970-72 prospectus as a 'Studio Loan' which was a new category, appearing for the first time in this brochure, the purpose of which was explained as follows:

Studio loans are addressed principally to the interest of students taking particular, related courses, and are intended to be shown within the physical teaching area of an individual craft. The display space used should be regularly locked when not under surveillance. Most studio loans consist of sixteen framed items, requiring 40-80 running feet of wall-space for their display. The standard period of loan is equivalent to a whole common academic term  
(V&A: MA/17/1)

It seems particularly pleasing that Mary Kirby's collection, which was collected by a teacher who intended her collection to be used as a teaching resource, should be available to textile students in a studio environment.

Set 176 also appears in the 1975-1977 prospectus which was the last Circulation Department brochure to be produced due to the closure of the department in 1977. The years between 1972 and 1975 are missing. This final prospectus included a picture of a textile from set 176. However, tracing it was made difficult because the photograph was described in the brochure only as part of set 176 and not with its unique museum number. As a result it was not possible to match this picture to any records. This problem was exacerbated because some of the records were not very detailed and without a full description it was impossible to match a photo to a museum record. The mystery was further

increased by the fact that judging from the picture this textile did not appear to be Africa. By a stroke of luck the textile photographed was found in the store room and can now be identified as Circ.575-1967. This textile is made of fine silk that has been resist dyed purple, it was purchased from the Berkeley Galleries for £3. It does not seem likely that this textile was made in West Africa. The information provided by the gallery at this time said it was from India. It was re-attributed as African by the Circulation Department very soon after its purchase as it was being used to advertise the West African Set the following year. There is no record of why this decision was made and possibly it was just a misunderstanding as a number of West African textiles were bought at the same time.



Fig. 8.22: Loan Collections 1968-70 prospectus West African Textiles – Studio Loan S.176 (V&A: MA/17/1)

## Summary

During the 1960s the Circulation Department was active in collecting a range of West African textiles from a variety of different sources. Often actively seeking them out from vendors. However, their attribution of textiles was often inaccurate with the department often taking the word of the vendor or donor to be accurate and in some cases failing to record the information given accurately. They used these textiles as examples of design to loan to art schools. They did not see 'ethnography' and 'design' as mutually exclusive categories. The Textiles Department did not entirely exclude African textiles, purchasing a small selection from the Church Missionary Society in 1965. Unfortunately many of the textiles from both the Circulation and the Textiles Department were later removed from the collection (see Chapter 9).

## 8.2 Other African Material

When it comes to African material the Circulation Department was not only interested in textiles from Sub-Saharan Africa. They also circulated other types of object from Africa such as sculpture and photographs of artefacts. They circulated objects both from their own collections and from other museums to both educational institutions and provincial museums and art galleries. The Circulation Department was also interested in North African material.

### Photographic Sets

The first time sub-Saharan African material appeared to be offered was in the *Material available for loan to art schools and teachers' training colleges 1951-2* prospectus which included a section on 'Non-European Decorative Arts'. Listed in this section was 'Set 107 - African Negro Art'. (V&A: MA/17/1/1) 'Negro' was considered an acceptable term at this time although it is now regarded as derogatory. It clearly indicates that this set related to Sub-Saharan Africa as North Africa was not considered 'Negro'. China, Persia, India and pre-Conquest America were also included in the Non-European Decorative arts section. The prospectus went on to explain that 'These sets are made up in the same way as the English sets listed above, but contain a higher proportion of photographic and a lower proportion of original material.' The 'English sets listed above' referred to are six sets, divided chronologically, that illustrate the development of the decorative arts in England which include 'original examples and photographs covering architecture, interior decoration, sculpture, furniture, textiles,

metalwork, engraving, ceramics, glass, printing, etc' (V&A: MA/17/1/1). These sets refer specifically to English, rather than British, decorative arts despite the fact that, 'the sets of material listed in this catalogue are available for loan to recognised Art Schools and Teachers' Training Colleges throughout Great Britain and Northern Ireland' (V&A: MA/17/1/1).

The 'African Negro Art' set appears again in the 1953-54 prospectus (the next one available in the archive). At this time Japan is also added to the Non-European Decorative Arts offerings. (V&A; MA/17/1/2) In the next available brochure which is for the year 1956-7 a change is made to the explanatory note which now reads as follows: 'Made up in the same way as the English sets above, the oriental sets contain a liberal amount of original material of a high standard, but the African and American consist of photographs only.' (V&A; MA/17/1/3) It is not clear whether this was due to a change in the material itself or whether the set was always made up solely of photographic material and it is now felt that it is necessary to make this clearer in the listings. The latter seems the more likely explanation. The 'African Negro Art' set was probably made up from a set of photographs taken by Walker Evans of African sculptures. In 1935 an exhibition was held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York entitled 'African Negro Art', it included more than 600 sculptures from Sub-Saharan Africa.

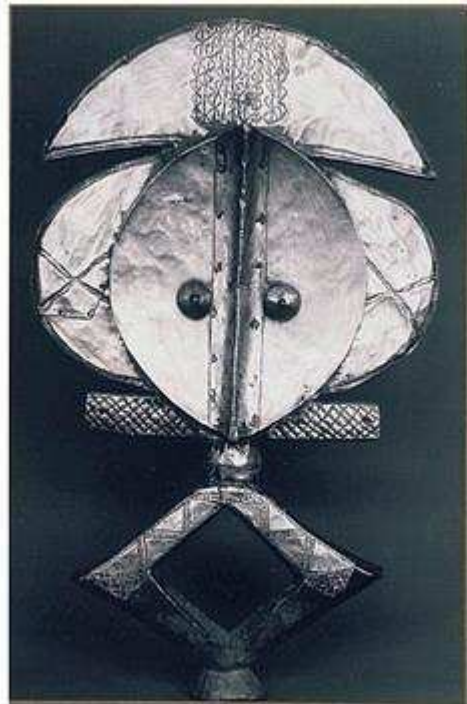


Fig. 8.23: Walker Evans. Ancestral Figure, Gabun, Ogowe River, Bakota.  
Photograph. V&A: 2321-1936

In 1935 the Museum of Modern Art commissioned Evans to make seventeen photographic portfolios of the exhibition, each of which was made up of 477 photos and a typed index. Walker Evans (1903-1975) was an American photographer best known for his photographs documenting the Great Depression of 1930s America. Most of the seventeen sets were destined to tour colleges for black students in the United States of America (education was still segregated along race lines across much of America at this time), but five were reserved for museums and universities. The V&A purchased a set which arrived in the museum in 1936. The first evidence we have of these photographs being toured is in 1951 when it was circulated to art schools and teacher training colleges. This doesn't necessarily mean it wasn't used before this date, as no records remain from this period in the archive, but the events of World War Two might

mean that it was only as the Circulation Department started to get going again after the war that they had the opportunity to make full use of this set.

The Walker Evans photographs would not have circulated as a complete portfolio because most Circulation Department sets contained only eighteen photographs. It is likely that a departmental curator made a selection, and possibly the department had more than one set made up of images from this set circulating at once. The 'African Negro Art' set continued to appear until the brochure for 1963-64 where both it and 'Pre-Conquest America', the only other set to be made up entirely of photographs were removed.

A second photographic set which included African material was also being circulated at this time. The Circulation Department offered ten photographic exhibitions devoted to sculpture including 'Set 192: Primitive Sculpture (African, Oceanic, American etc.)' (MA/17/1/2) It first appeared in the 1953-54 prospectus and continues to appear regularly until 1963-64 when the listing is amended slightly to read '290: African Sculpture, Examples mainly from Congo and West African States.' This is the same year that the listing for 'African Negro Art' disappears. It is likely that the photographs for Set 290 were also taken from the Walker Evans portfolio as no evidence has been found of other photographs of African art works in the V&A collection. The change in title also suggests these were the Walker Evans photographs, as the 1935 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York also focussed on West African material and sculpture from the Congo (Sweeney 1966).

The presence of this photographic set in the V&A collection is important because the photographs were derived from the 'African Negro Art' exhibition held at the Museum of Modern Art in 1935, which is often credited as the first occasion when African objects were presented as 'Art' to a western audience. The catalogue of the original exhibition is worth quoting at some length in order to understand this change in attitude.

Today the art of Negro Africa has its place of respect among the esthetic traditions of the world. We recognize in it the mature plastic idiom of a people whose social, psychological and religious outlook, as well as history and environment, differ widely from ours. We can never hope to plumb its expression fully. Nevertheless, it no longer represents for us the mere untutored fumbings of the savage. Nor, on the other hand, do its picturesque or exotic characteristics blind us any longer to its plastic seriousness, moving dramatic qualities, eminent craftsmanship and sensibility to material.

Today the art of Negro Africa stands in the position accorded it on genuine merits that are purely its own. For us its psychological content must always remain in greater part obscure. But, because its qualities have a basic plastic integrity and because we have learned to look at Negro art from this viewpoint, it has finally come within the scope of our enjoyment, even as the art expressions of such other alien cultures as the Mayan, the Chaldaean, and the Chinese.  
(Sweeney 1965: 11)

This change in attitude is attributed in the catalogue of the original exhibition to the interest shown in African art by European artists from the early twentieth century onwards (Sweeney 1965: 12). These objects are portrayed as being 'rescued' from the ethnographic gaze:

Anthropologists and ethnologists in their works had completely overlooked (or at best only mentioned perfunctorily) the esthetic qualities in artefacts of primitive peoples. Frobenius was the first to call attention to African art. But...[he] treated the subject primarily from non-esthetic viewpoints. It was not the scholars who discovered Negro art to European taste but the artist.  
(Sweeney 1965: 12)



The presence of this collection of photographs so associated with a change in attitudes towards African art in the V&A is interesting.

### **Developments in the Museums and Galleries Scheme.**

One of the most important areas of expansion for the Circulation Department was the increased scope of what it was able to lend to museums and galleries. This happened in two important ways; firstly in the lending of complete exhibitions rather than just cases of objects. Secondly, the Circulation Department began to circulate objects and exhibitions from other museums.

The five year report which covered the years 1948-1953 explained that there had been some changes to the types of items that the department was lending. 'The new system of temporary exhibitions, lent for 2-3 month periods, described in the 1948 Report, was put into operation in 1949 and had since grown rapidly, side by side with a revival of the pre-war system of small annual loans.' (MA/15/21)

When the Circulation Collection relaunched after World War II it offered three types of exhibition. Firstly 'Framed exhibitions' designed to be hung on walls; secondly 'Three Dimensional Exhibits' packed in floor cases or as free standing objects and finally 'Single Case' exhibits which were leant for longer periods and were designed to fill gaps in the collections of provincial museums. This last category was a continuation from before the war. (V&A: MA/17/2/6)

The Department was pleased with this change as it allowed it to put together more ambitious exhibitions.

The change to temporary exhibitions has enabled the Department to assemble important exhibitions of a size and quality impossible under

the pre-war system of small annual loans, and has partly been made possible by the deliberate transfer of selected examples (totalling 2,466 since 1948) from the main collections of the museum (V&A: MA/15/21)

They also identified this as an area they were keen to expand on in the next few years. The five year report produced in 1953 reads 'It should be possible during the next five years for the Department to place more emphasis on Exhibitions with a definite thematic or didactic appeal.' They go on to explain that previously a need to build up a stock of exhibitions has lead them to focus on straightforward ones, but that they are now ready to do more complicated ones and to make them more accessible to a lay audience by providing more detailed labelling and booklets to accompany the exhibitions.

The results of this work can be seen in the 1955 Exhibitions for loan to museums art galleries and libraries booklet which explained:

The exhibitions and collections are now divided into five categories. Category 1 consists of a new type of special exhibitions, larger than those previously circulated and mounted wholly or partly on newly designed display units. Each of them is accompanied by a printed catalogue or booklet... Categories 2, 3, and 4 cover the medium and small size exhibitions sub-divided into exhibitions which need both the floor and wall space of a gallery, those which need only floor space, and those which need only wall space. Category 5 comprises the single-case collections.  
(V&A: 1955)

The Category 1 exhibitions were much more ambitious than anything previously produced by the department and were sometimes referred to as 'Special Exhibitions.' There were additional provisions attached to these larger, more valuable displays as the prospectus for the year 1970-71 explains: 'These exhibitions can be lent only to borrowers who can make available the whole of a

gallery for their display and can guarantee continuous warding during the hours of public opening.’ (V&A: MA/17/6)

### **Material from other Collections**

In 1952 in the Travelling Exhibitions Available for Loan to Public Museums and Art Galleries 1952 prospectus the Circulation Department made the following announcement:

New Developments, 1952

The principal development in the Circulation Department’s loans to Museums and Libraries during 1952 will be a considerable extension of the practice of making up and lending material borrowed for this purpose from other institutions.

(V&A: MA/17/2/3)

Although the material from other museums was mainly used for the scheme concerning regional museums and art galleries, sometimes objects from other collections was also circulated to art colleges. The only example of this concerning sub-Saharan exhibitions was a ‘framed set’ that first appears on a slip of paper inserted into the 1968-1970 catalogue:

Supplementary list of collections newly available to colleges from September, 1969.

Framed Sets

190 West African and Indian Small Sculpture. Cast brass and bronze objects including Asante gold-weights, Kondh toy figures, etc.

Displayed in deep frames; lent mostly from the Horniman Museum.

(V&A: MA/17/1)

This set also appears in the 1970-1972 listings. The Circulation Department purchased a series of Asante gold weights between 1968 and 1971.

The 1948-53 report also contains some interesting information about lending material from other museums. The department reported that ‘A start has been made on a small scale to implement the Commissions 1948 recommendation that the Department should circulate material from other national institutions’. (V&A: MA/15/21) The Department went on to explain in the ‘Plans for Future Developments’ section of the report that circulating objects from the British Museum had proved successful and that they hoped to build on this success by working more with both the British Museum and to expand the scheme to other museums. However, they go on to sound a note of caution ‘Experience has shown, however, that the circulation of such borrowed material will only work smoothly if the Circulation Department is responsible for the actual preparation and arrangement of the exhibition as well as merely for its packing and allocation.’ (V&A: MA/15/21)

There were two important exhibitions featuring objects from Africa that the Circulation Department organised in conjunction with other museums during the late 1960s and early 1970s. These exhibitions did not focus on textiles but it is worth looking at them in some detail as they are instructive about the attitude of the department to Africa. The first was a display of Benin Bronzes from the British Museum collection, while the second was organised with the Horniman Museum and featured contemporary objects from Ethiopia. Comparing the two, quite different, exhibitions is also illuminating in relation to discussions about art and ethnography.

## **Benin Bronzes**

The Circulation Department had a fruitful relationship with the British Museum starting in 1960. They borrowed a diverse array of objects for touring exhibitions; from Peruvian pottery to Renaissance prints and from Sumerian antiquities to German sixteenth century woodcuts. The first African objects they borrowed from the British Museum appear in the 1966-67 exhibition prospectus. The prospectus lists the following in the Category 1 – Special Exhibitions section.

### **A19: Benin Bronzes**

The bronze sculptures of Benin, Nigeria represent a tradition of unique continuity and distinction. They were made over a period extending at least as far back as the sixteenth century and are to be considered among the great art treasures of the world. This exhibition consists of at twenty selected plaques, in high relief, lent for a limited period by the trustees of the British Museum.  
(V&A: MA/17/5/1)

The earliest mention of this exhibition in the archive is a letter from Hogben to Adrian Digby, Keeper of the Department of Ethnography at the British Museum dated 9 December 1965 and enquiring whether the Benin Bronzes will be available in January so that the Circulation Department can begin putting the exhibition together ready for it to travel in April. The answer must have been ‘yes’ as the ‘Nineteen Benin Bronze plaques’ are recorded as arriving on loan at the V&A on 23 December following a visit by Hogben to see the objects at the British Museum. Hogben wrote to the British Museum on 17 January to follow up on this visit. As his letter is interesting in revealing how the Circulation Department went about its work so it is quoted here at some length.

When I saw you the other day, I was still just getting acquainted with the plaques. Out of the thirty shown in Philadelphia, three were in fact withdrawn for exhibition in Dakar, and some of the others seemed not altogether suitable for reasons of their fragility. With your agreement that substitutes be selected, I then looked through all the bronzes in return.

You will have heard from Fagg that I made notes of certain objects in the round, and that I was extremely anxious to include a token representation. I subsequently pared down both lists to what I felt was the most practical minimum number, and arrived at a total request for the loan of nineteen plaques, to be supported if possible by three objects in the round and one hip mask in relief. I quite understand that these last objects could not be released to South Kensington, under Lord Radcliffe's authorisation for the plaques, in advance of the trustees meeting. But it is only the plaques which require any elaborate physical mounting, and provided we can be getting on with these we shall be happy to hear about the others in mid-February.

I do most strongly believe that their inclusion would add a great deal to the impact of the exhibition, and we should be sincerely grateful if you were to give it friendly consideration in reporting to the Trustees on our request.

(MA/1/B2675/19)

That these objects had recently returned from Philadelphia and some had gone on to Dakar is an indication of the importance of these objects and the international interest in them. Unfortunately Hogben's request to have 'objects in the round' in addition to the plaques was turned down and only the nineteen plaques were ultimately included in the exhibition. This perhaps marked the start of the Department's problems with the British Museum's trustees which brought the relationship between the Circulation Department and the British Museum to an end.

The Circulation Department also made use of the exhibition notes and captions from the Bronzes' previous display in Philadelphia, editing and adapting them to serve their own purpose. They appear to have changed the long single text into a series of shorter texts designed as labels for

individual objects. Interestingly the introduction describes the bronzes as being ‘rescued’ by the British from the palace of the Oba of Benin. The Circulation Department did not amend this. As we will see below Annie Coombes has argued that the Benin bronzes are an important case study in how African artefacts were treated by Museums and in creating the view Britain had of Africa and how that view both persisted and changed (Coombes 1994). The continuing use of phrases like ‘rescued’ after Nigerian independence in the 1960s is an example of this (Fig. 8.24).

Benin City was the capital city of the Kingdom of Benin, which was located in what is now Southern Nigeria. The king was known as the Oba. During the late nineteenth century this area was becoming increasingly important to European powers due to the trade in palm oil and other commodities. The 1890s were characterised by a long and often violent struggle over trading rights in which the British failed to break Oba Ovawamren’s monopoly over the lucrative trade in palm oil (Ryder 1977). In November 1896 the Oba closed all markets to outside trade (Ryder 1977: 283). The following year (February 1897) British troops under the command of Admiral Sir Harry Rawson attacked Benin City. During the punitive attack the city was burned and extensively looted. (Obinyan 1988: 29-40) The Benin Bronzes were ‘discovered’ at this time and brought to Britain and in September of the same year 300 bronze plaques were displayed at the British Museum (Coombes 1994: 27)

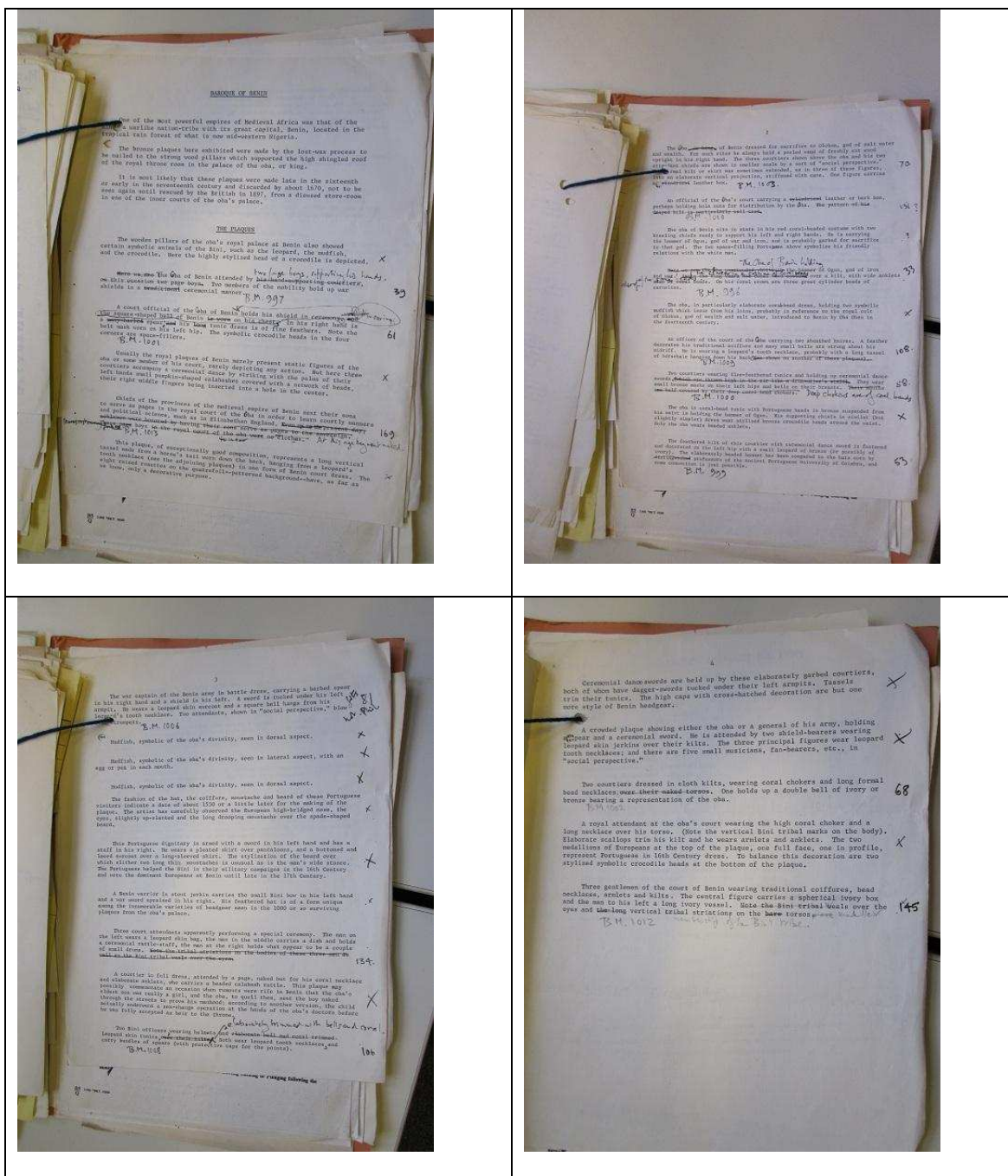


Fig. 8.24: Exhibition information provided to the V&A by the British Museum or the Museum of Philadelphia and annotated by the Circulation Department in 1965. V&A: MA/1/B2675/19

The impact of these Bronzes on Britain's perception of Africa and Africans and on the development of the burgeoning fields of Anthropology and Ethnology has



been discussed extensively by Annie Coombes in *Reinventing Africa* (Coombes 1994). In the first chapter she argues that:

If the valorisation of cultural production has any impact on a reassessment of the general culture and society of the producer, then the influx of sixteenth-century carved ivories and lost wax castings from Benin City onto the European art and antiquities market, together with the subsequent proliferation of popular and 'scientific' treatises which their discovery generated, should have fundamentally shaken the bedrock of the derogatory Victorian assumptions about Africa, and more specifically, the African's place in history. Yet, ... this was certainly not the case. In fact, what the Benin example demonstrates is precisely the extent and the ways in which such contradictory beliefs could be maintained.  
(Coombes 1994: 7-9)

Coombes goes on to explain that initially there was disbelief at the idea that these objects, which demonstrated both a strong aesthetic sense and a high level of technical sophistication, could have been produced by Africans. However, evidence quickly came to light that these objects could only have been produced by Africans. This leads to the argument that if these objects were produced by Africans of the past they could not be replicated by Africans of the present, reinforcing the theory of 'de-generation'.

However, even in 1898, there remained another opinion which could not be completely ignored: 'It is possible, on the other hand, that their knowledge of founding was derived from purely African sources...' That an African origin for the Benin material could be posited so early on in the debates of the scientific press may seem an enlightened conclusion in the context of the rabid xenophobia expressed in the popular press. Indeed in many ways it was, although, as we shall see, such a proposition was not as rare as history has so far led us to believe. None the less, it should be recognised that, even here, any challenge presented by the hypothesis was tempered by the fact that it remained inscribed within that familiar discourse shared by the popular press: the discourse of racial degeneracy augmented by the concluding statement the, 'the metalwork discovered in the city may, therefore, be the relics of a higher civilisation'.  
(Coombes 1994: 27 Quotes from *Nature* (7 July 1898), p.226)

The idea of Africans as being inferior to Europeans is central to the justification of colonialism as a civilising mission and so any evidence that Africans have artistic or technical skills equal to those of Europeans has to be explained away and justified.

The use of the term ‘rescued’ to describe how the Benin bronzes were taken from Benin city is a reflection of the idea that the great art of an earlier Edo people had to be saved from their own ‘savage’ descendents by the British. It is evidence of how attitudes persist and are inadvertently revealed, repeated and reinforced over long periods of time through the unthinking use of certain phrases and words.

Perhaps it remained as important in the 1960s as it had at the end of the nineteenth century to be able to view British colonialism as a force for good.

Criticising the actions of the British military in 1897 might have led to difficult questions about the ongoing presence of these objects in British museum collections.

The exhibition schedule can be pieced together from information in the archive such as insurance records and correspondence with the British Museum. It is worth reproducing the schedule in full in order to see how widely Circulating Exhibitions travelled.

<b>Location</b>	<b>Dates</b>
Hull, Ferens Art Gallery	20 June to 12 August 1966
Bradford, Cartwright Memorial Museum	13 August to 23 September
Harrogate Museum	23 September to 18 November
Birkenhead, Williamson Art Gallery	19 November to 6 January 1967
Bolton Art Gallery	7 Jan to 17 Feb
Bristol City Museum	4 March to late April
The Victoria & Albert Museum	20 April to 12 June
Manchester Museum	17 June to 31 July
Sunderland Museum	5 August to 18 September
Gateshead Museum	23 September to 13 November

The Victoria & Albert Museum (not on display)	18 November to 8 January 1968
Bournemouth Museum	13 January to 26 February

During the exhibition's second stay at the V&A it was in storage. This came about because the exhibition was due to be shown at The Bethnal Green Museum (a branch of the V&A) but this showing was cancelled. It is not clear why from the archival material available.

Unlike the smaller exhibitions and the material circulated to art colleges these exhibitions were often reported in the local press. Unfortunately the reviews are not particularly illuminating as they rely heavily on the information and press releases generated by the Circulation Department itself. Interestingly there seemed to be some confusion about which museum is behind this particular display. One reviewer from Bradford correctly stated that: 'This exhibition has been made available from the Department of Ethnography in the British Museum, and has been organised and arranged by the Circulation Department of the Victoria and Albert Museum.' However, another only says it is from the British Museum and does not mention the role of the Circulation Department. A reviewer from Bournemouth did the same while a review by Eustace Nash, also written about the display in Bournemouth fails to mention the British Museum at all and states that 'These work are on loan from the ethnological and circulation department of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.' There was, of course, no ethnology department in the V&A.

This exhibition appears in the offerings for 1967-68 together with the information that there is an exhibition fee of £15 for museums or galleries

wishing to borrow this display and an insurance cost of £35 to cover the estimated £80,000 value of the exhibition (V&A: MA/17/5/3). The exhibition also appears in the 1968-69 leaflet detailing exhibitions available for circulation but the copy in the archive has 'Withdrawn' hand written across it in red ink (V&A: MA/17/5/4), the Benin Bronzes were returned to the British Museum in April 1968, their presence in the later catalogue reflects the fact that the V&A had hoped to keep them Circulating for longer. This is shown by a letter dated 28 April 1967 from Hogben to Digby.

Dear Digby

Benin Bronzes, Travelling Exhibition

I am writing about the travelling exhibition of Benin Bronzes which we hold from your department. The original period of loan agreed was for two years, taking us to May 1968, and you said at the time that an extension of this period might be considered on review. We are now planning our catalogue of exhibitions to be available during the financial year 1968-9, and although this is still some way off it does lead us to ask whether you could agree to recommend to your Trustees an extension of the loan by two further years in principle – again subject to mutual review.

....

We have been more than pleased to have this important collection in our hands, and feel it is of great importance that people outside London should have opportunities to see African art of this quality. I do therefore very much hope you will give friendly consideration to our request.

(V&A: MA/1/B2675/19)

On 1 May 1967, Digby replies

Dear Hogben,

Thank you for your letter on the Benin Bronzes Travelling Exhibition. I am afraid that at this stage I cannot answer your question about the extension in view of the fact that the whole policy of the Trustees with regard to loans is in the melting pot. As soon as the position is clearer I will write to you again.

(V&A: MA/1/B2675/19)

There is no further correspondence on this matter recorded in the archive until October of the same year when a letter arrives from L.W. Lea, the Executive

Officer of the British Museum Department of Ethnography demanding to know the movements of these objects. The attitude towards this rather brusque and demanding letter, and perhaps the Circulation Departments increasing frustration with the British Museum, is indicated by the fact that somebody, has circled a spelling error and the Executive job title linked them in pencil and commented 'ye gods!' (Fig. 8.25).

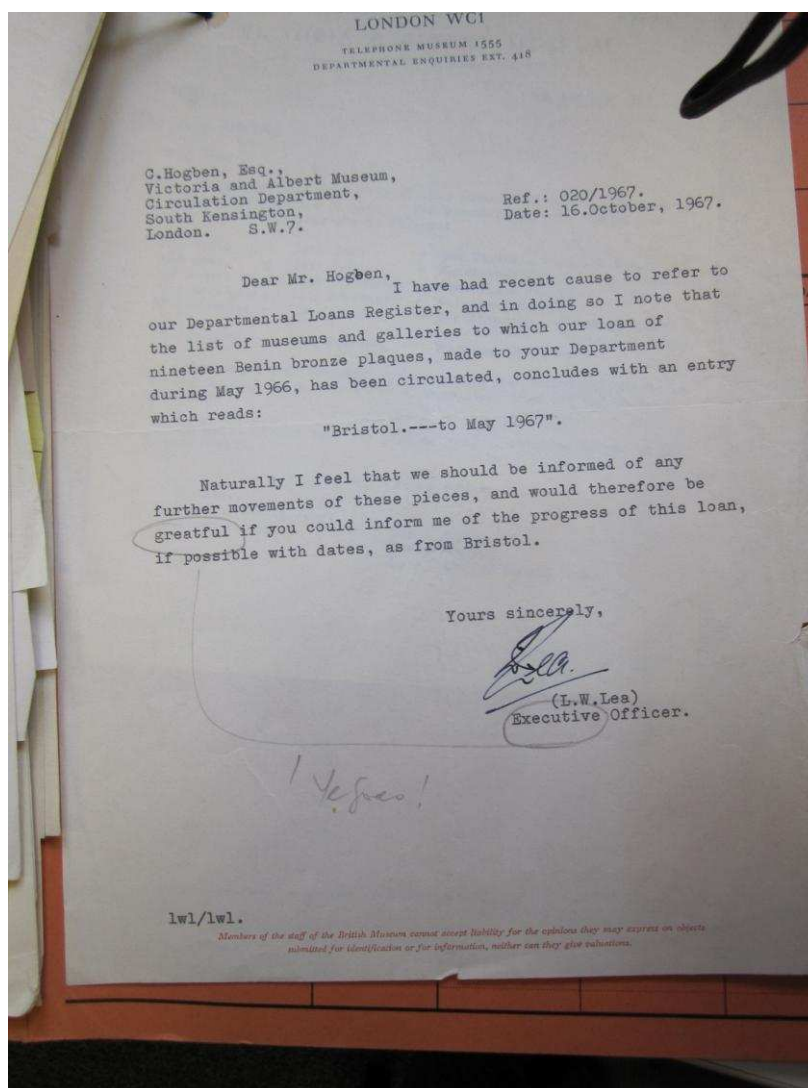


Fig. 8.25: Letter from L.W. Lea to Carol Hogben dated 16 October 1967.  
V&A: MA/1/B2675/19

The Benin Bronzes did not tour for another two years despite the V&A's request and this appears from the archives to be the last time the Circulation Department and the British Museum worked together. It seems that the policy on loans that the British Museum Trustees were reviewing when Digby wrote to Hogben was eventually decided in a way that made it difficult for the Circulation Department to continue working with the British Museum. A departmental report from the 1970s states that: 'The policy of producing exhibitions of British Museum material faltered largely because of the (as we saw it) unsympathetic attitude of the British Museum Trustees.' (V&A: MA/15/20) It is a shame that this turned out to be the case as the exhibition of the Benin Bronzes appears to have been a success as is shown by this letter from

W.B. Fagg, Deputy Keeper of Ethnography at the British Museum to Hugh Wakefield (Keeper of the V&A's Circulation Department from 1960) dated 8 April 1968

Dear Wakefield,  
 I write to thank you for the safe return of the Benin bronzes. We have of course scrutinized them most carefully and I have been delighted to find none even of the minor rubbings which are usually considered inevitable when so heavy a loan has to be moved about to so many places. I really think that our two departments did a very good job on this loan.  
 ... We have been very pleased to hear how widely appreciated the exhibition was and indeed we have seen frequent press cuttings from all over the country about it.  
 Yours Sincerely  
 (V&A: MA/1/B2675/19)

## **Ethiopia**

The 1970-71 catalogue has another Category 1 African offering, this time Ethiopian. Again the exhibition is based around objects from another museum, this time the Horniman, but is put together by Circulation Department staff. There is never any suggestion that the V&A should draw on its own Ethiopian collections which were considerable (see Chapter 2). Again this may be because the focus of this exhibition was present day ordinary life in Ethiopia while the V&A collection was of extra-ordinary nineteenth century objects. The 1970-71 prospectus reads as follows:

A.23 Based on an exhibition shown in the Horniman Museum in 1967, this is in effect a study of the ancient Christian culture of the Central Highlands. The Ethiopian work is attractive and finely made, although the examples are chosen mainly for their ethnographical significance to include ecclesiastical accoutrements, paintings, musical instruments, weapons and jewellery. Among the objects from everyday life is a surprising papyrus boat from Lake Tana, a relic of the style of boats used by the Ancient Egyptians. Recipes are included for the illustration of Ethiopian food, and the exhibition is provided with tapes for accompanying Ethiopian music and song.

Part of the material has been borrowed directly from the Horniman collection, but this has been supplemented by many items especially acquired for the exhibition by Mrs Jean Jenkins of the Horniman Museum on a field expedition in Ethiopia during 1969.  
(V&A: MA/17/6)

The Horniman Museum in South London was founded in 1901 by tea trader and collector Frederick John Horniman and is a natural history and ethnographic collection. As we have seen, the relationship with the British Museum had broken down by this point and after the British Museum; the Horniman Museum and Library (as it was then known) was the next best place to go for African artefacts in London. On the 9 October 1968 Hugh Wakefield, Keeper of Circulation wrote to D.M. Boston, Curator at the Horniman Museum and Library (as it was then known) to enquire about the possibility of putting a circulating

exhibition together. Interestingly, the Circulation Department seem keen to expand their ethnographic offerings, an exhibition genre not usually associated with the V&A.

I recently learned from Mrs. Jean Jenkins of the Ethiopian exhibition you held some time ago, and I have been wondering whether you would consider the possibility of lending some of this material to form a travelling exhibition for our service. As you will see from the catalogue, we have at present virtually nothing of ethnographic interest and for this reason especially I feel that a travelling exhibition of Ethiopian material would be very popular.  
(V&A: MA/1/H2850)

There is no suggestion that the exhibition could or should be anything other than ethnographic, although it is worth remembering that this exhibition was based on an earlier one at the Horniman, which is a museum of ethnography. The Circulation Department did seem a little apprehensive about putting on an ethnographic exhibition but they were also determined to make a success of it, as a letter from Wakefield to Jenkins dated 28 October 1968 shows.

I am most grateful to you and to David Boston for showing me the material which was used, with obvious success, in your Ethiopian Exhibition of 1966. There is no doubt at all in my mind that this would make a most interesting and important travelling exhibition. As we have not previously mounted an exhibition of this nature, we should want to make it a major exhibition illustrating the distinctive high culture of Ethiopia, covering as many aspects as possible of the country, the Church, arts and crafts, music, painting, costume and jewellery, transport, weaving etc., and we should like it to be accompanied by tapes of Ethiopian music, slides and, if possible, films. We envisage considerable radio coverage.  
(V&A: MA/1/H2850)

It seems that the circulation collection is always keen to expand and broaden its provision.



This correspondence between the V&A and the Horniman Museum is also useful for revealing how the department worked, as Wakefield explained the process of putting together a circulating exhibition:

It would be an advantage if we could have the material for a fairly long period, probably three or four years, in order to show it in as many places as possible. In mounting this exhibition, we should of course, need your advice and would check all our plans and written matter with you; but we should carry out in this Department all the work otherwise needed and should bear all the expenses. Your name would be associated with ours in all the announcements and advertisements.  
(V&A: MA/1/H2850)

As it turned out, the work of Jean Jenkins mentioned above would prove absolutely crucial in the development of this exhibition. Jenkins was an ethnomusicologist who had worked at the Horniman from 1954; in 1960 she was put in charge of the Horniman's musical instrument department. The importance of her work as an ethnomusicologist should not be underestimated. A review of her work and her legacy at the Museum Ethnographers Conference in 2006 pointed out that:

A recent Museums and Galleries Commission report acknowledged that the musical instrument collection at the Horniman Museum 'has some claims to being more comprehensive than any other in the UK' (Arnold-Forster and La Rue 1993: 65). Even now, the Horniman publicly credits Jenkins with building up the collections relating to religious ritual in Ethiopia, and there is no doubt that her acquisitions in other areas helped to strengthen and widen the museum's collection, supporting its claim to 'include sound-producing objects from all periods of history, from all parts of the world, and from all musical traditions.'... Arguably, however, the most significant body of Jenkins's work is her collection of sound recordings, acknowledged by the British Library as 'one of the largest most diverse collections of ethnographic music recordings made by a single ethnomusicologist'.  
(Dijkstra-Downie and Bicknell 2007)

Jenkins most important contribution to the Circulation Department exhibition was to purchase objects especially for the display. Following a viewing of the material available at the Horniman, Wakefield wrote to Jenkins with a request:

You mentioned some items which would be very desirable for the exhibition, but which are unrepresented, or else are represented only by single, irreplaceable examples in your museum collections. As you are just now about to go to Ethiopia, we should be most grateful if you could possibly use your endeavours to fill some of these gaps for the sake of making this a properly representative exhibition.  
(V&A: MA/1/H2850)

Jenkins responded with a list of suggested purchases and approximate prices and the V&A duly arranged for £200 to be given to Jenkins. Jenkins was an inveterate traveller who would spend all her allotted holiday time from the Horniman travelling the world collecting objects and recording folk music. She funded the trips herself. (Dijkstra-Downie and Bicknell 2007). She reported back to Wakefield on how her trip was going.

Dear Hugh,

This is a brief note to tell you I have spent the £200! But I hope you will be pleased with what I have bought.

I was able to get three items which I did not expect: a sacred chain, one large and one small icon, and one ... wooden cross. These were expensive, but I hope you will think they are worthwhile. I have also got the boat, (at considerable travel expense, 910kms at 6km a litre petrol, 42c a litre - \$6ET = £1), a loom, some cloth, one dress, a basketry table and some ... baskets, all the main musical instruments, one old \*\*\*, some typical jewelry, one processional cross and several differing types of ... crosses, some red horn glasses, goat skin sandals, ... coffee pots, water containers etc. I also hope I have got a present of some priests clothing and umbrella. But that must wait till I get back to Asmara (and that in turn is complicated by the fact that the Emperor will arrive at the same time). If I can get back, having spent all my money in Addis!... However, I think I have got value for money; I have spent days in bargaining which I hate, but I think it should make a good display when added to the Horniman material.

If I find additional things which I think will add to the display, I shall get some if I can borrow the money here. Then you can tell me if you want them or if the £200 worth is sufficient...

I am finding quite a lot of good things ... but feel that time is pressing hard now. As, I may add, is the climate.  
(V&A: MA/1/H2850)

Although she complains only of the climate in her letter she recounted many exciting adventures to journalists when the exhibition was being promoted in London, including a run-in with some lions! In the end Jenkins spent a total of £272 on 86 objects, including the cost of transporting all the material back to London, 85 of which eventually made it into the exhibition. (V&A: MA/1/H2850)

Although these objects were bought on the instructions of the Circulation Department and paid for with V&A funds they are not now in the V&A collection. A form in the archives officially receiving the objects into the museum has the following note on the bottom initialled by Hugh Wakefield and Dated 11 Sept 1969.

This concerns 85 items which Miss Jean Jenkins bought for us in Ethiopia a few months ago to supplement the material we are borrowing from the Horniman Museum for the Ethiopian Tradition Exhibition. We are proposing initially to list the objects with 'C' numbers as their value is mostly slight and directed solely to the purpose of this exhibition  
(V&A: MA/1/H2850)

'C numbers' were temporary numbers assigned to objects while they were in exhibitions that were circulating and denoted that an object had not been fully accessioned into the collection. The use of a 'C number' suggests that the Department never intended to fully accession these objects. While the Circulation Department was keen to work with other museums to provide ethnographic exhibitions for regional museums, objects deemed ethnographic

continued to have no place in the V&A itself. In 1975 a list was made of 'objects to be transferred to the Horniman' which was the same as the list of objects Jenkins had purchased with V&A money.

The exhibition appears to have been a success and toured to Brighton, Durham, Bolton, Sunderland, Manchester and Swansea before being displayed at the Horniman. The exhibition attracted a lot of press coverage.

The use of temporary 'C' numbers by the Circulation Collection is revealing in and of itself. A note from 14 June 1927 explains the thinking behind these numbers.

For these reasons I propose, subject to your approval, not to register posters with Circ., Nos., in future but to number them with the 'ephemerides' ['c' numbers] which are not subject to audit. The posters would then still figure on the receipts obtained from schools, but as they went out of service, they could be destroyed or new ones be mounted over them, without any question of 'writing off' the books.

Extracts from:- S.F.290. Part 5a. 27/4832  
(V&A: 1-90)

What this meant was that it was easier for the Circulation Department to dispose of items once they were no longer useful. This was important to the Department who circulated a lot of contemporary objects of little monetary value, such as posters, to art schools for educational purposes. If they had had to go through the lengthy official writing off process every time they replaced a poster, the department would have ground to a halt.

There is, in the V&A archive, a list of objects that were only ever granted 'ephemerides' status; they are listed when they begin to circulate and once worn

out they are simply crossed through with red pen and a date. This can provide an important insight into the activities of the Circulation Department and the sort of objects they were using but that are not otherwise represented in the V&A collection. Unfortunately because of the 'ephemeral' nature of these objects very little additional information remains about them in the archive.

The 'C' register for the period 1927-1938 includes the numbers C11139 to C11144, which are described as '6 Cane mats. W. African'. The entry is not dated but, judging by the dated listings that surround it, it was written during the early 1930s. Not all of the mats are listed as having been destroyed but those that were are dated in 1939 and 20 August 1954. A further six 'West African Mats' were added to the list as C.11436 to C11441 on 14 February 1935 and another six in August of that year (C.11822-C.11827). Again they were not all listed as destroyed but those that were are dated 1954 and 1956. Unfortunately no descriptive information about the mats is given in the register so it is impossible to know more precisely what they were like or where exactly they were from.

It has been possible to find a little more information about these objects through the Circulation Department records. A note signed by Kennedy and dated seventh of August 1934 which reads: 'We have received recently from [illegible] a [illegible] of W. African mats. These have no numbers, and I suggest that we should take up say ½ dozen no's at a time, as they are selected for schools. Some have already been selected.' (V&A: 160-30 (part 1)) Unfortunately the illegibility of this note prevents us from knowing from where the V&A were

acquiring these mats. (Fig. 8.26) A further note to Central inventory dated 15 August explains a little more about why the objects are given 'C' numbers 'We have decided to give C numbers to these mats, which must get worn, owing to the fact that they will circulate unframed.' (V&A: 160-30 (part 1)). The 'C' registers do not seem to contain any further reference to African objects but the paucity of the descriptions means it is uncertain to know for certain whether or not other African objects were circulated in this manner.

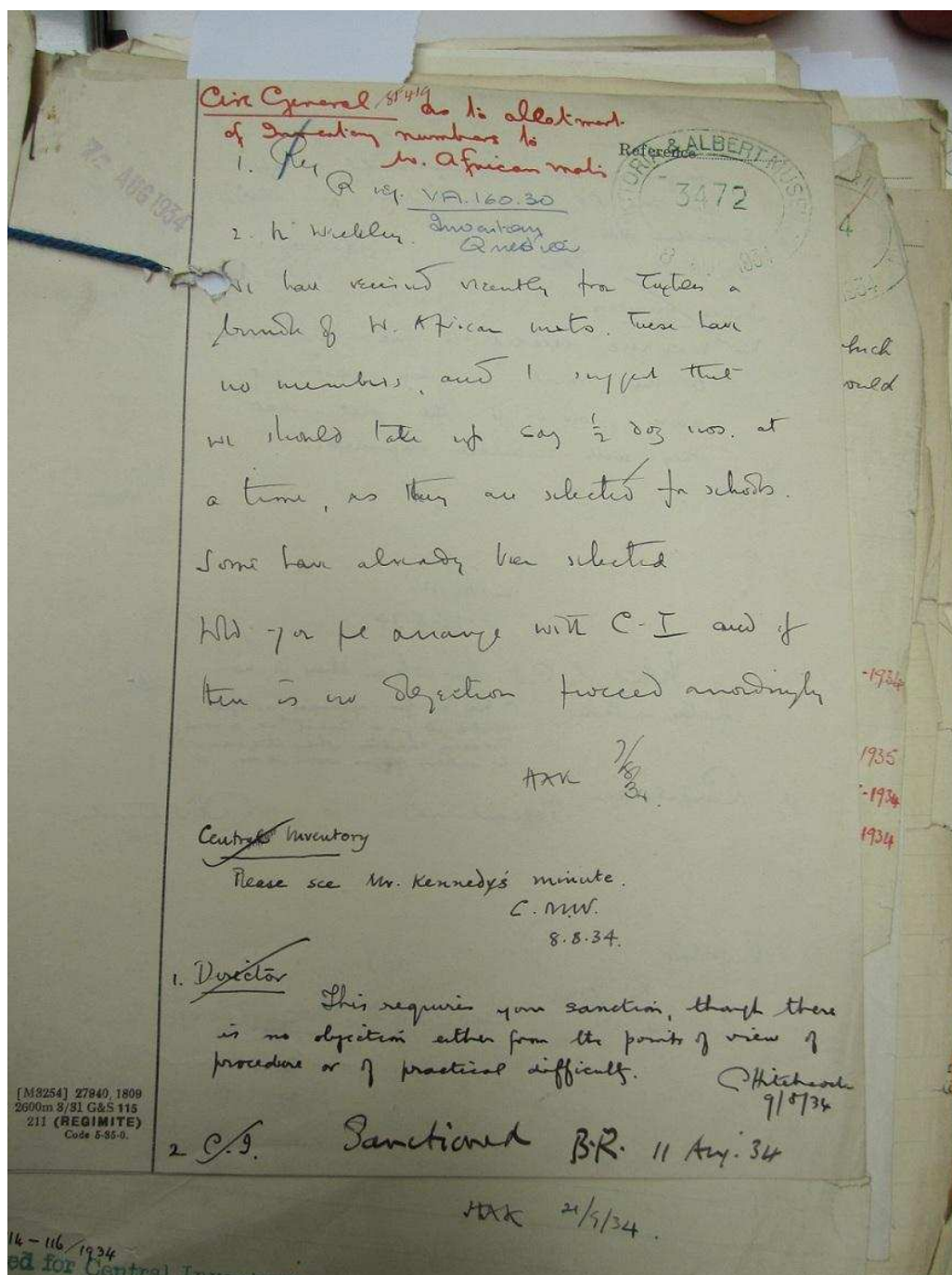


Fig. 8.26: Departments (Circulation) Inventory Questions. V&A: 160-30 (part 1)

## Overseas loans.

The Circulation Department was also interested in sending its exhibitions and displays overseas but was never able to fully develop this aspect of its work. In a pamphlet entitled *Circulation Department: Its History and Scope*, which has been tentatively dated '1950?' by the National Art Library (itself a department of

the V&A) but which may have been produced as early as 1948 the question of overseas loans is addressed.

#### Loans Abroad

Requests are frequently received for travelling exhibitions to be sent abroad, particularly to the Dominions and Colonies. Loans have, from time to time, been made to South Africa, Australia and New Zealand, but the home-demand for the exhibitions has hitherto been too large to permit any regular circulation of exhibitions overseas.  
(V&A: MA/15/23)

We know that in 1948 a collection of English pottery and porcelain was sent to South Africa because Peter Floud mentions it in a 'Draft Script for an Interview with Peter Floud about the Circulation Collection in the year of its centenary.' Floud goes on to explain why this aspect of the Department's work is important to him.

B.[Interviewer] That reminds me. I was wanting to ask you about lending things to the Empire.

F. [Floud] We're hoping to do this on a much bigger scale in the next few years. Up till now we haven't been able to include the Empire in any organised system of loans, but we have sent quite a number of exhibits around at various times. As far as I can remember at this moment we have collections of pottery in South Africa, some costumes in Tasmania, and some small collections of ..... [dots appear in original document] Of course we realise that this is only a drop in the ocean compared to the tremendous demand that there is in all the Dominions and Colonies. Obviously its [sic] going to be a big job to organise anything really satisfactory, be we're determined to do so. After all, the national museum collections in London really belong to the whole Empire, and we must do our best to see that at least a part of their enormous riches is made available to the colonies and dominions.

(V&A: MA/15/14)

The interest in expanding the department in order to circulate more internationally remained, although it had not materialised fully by the time of the department's closure. An undated document in the archive that appears to have



been written in the early 1970s reveals anxiety about changing the department's name to 'Regional Services' for fear that it sounded too provincial and might put off potential international borrowers reveals that the desire to expand international loans remained (V&A: MA/15/20).

### **Summary**

As well as collecting and exhibiting textiles the Circulation Department also circulated other African material from the V&A collection. It was also involved in organising exhibitions in conjunction with other museums. The Ethiopian exhibition organised in conjunction with the Horniman Museum was explicitly an 'ethnographic' exhibition and as such none of the material from it was considered suitable for the collection, showing that this distinction was being made at this time. Although the Circulation Department collected African textiles for their design merit it does not appear to have occurred to them to do an exhibition for museums and galleries of African material that was not ethnographic.

## **Chapter 9: Further Disposal and Hayes Textiles Ltd. 1989-2000**

### **Introduction**

By the end of the twentieth century it appeared that nothing much had changed with regard to the V&A's attitude toward collecting textiles, and objects more generally, from Africa. During the 1980s the Museum acquired a few textiles from Sub-Saharan Africa. As with the majority of the other Sub-Saharan pieces in the collection the textiles acquired were gifts and originated in West Africa. In 1985 two examples of raffia woven and embroidered cloth from the Democratic Republic of Congo (T.134-1985 and T.135-1984) were donated to the museum by a curator working in the museum following the death of their original owner John Compton.

The most notable trend with regard to Sub-Saharan Africa during the 1980s and early 1990s was that of disposal. Fifty-two such textiles were removed from the collection; this represented a significant proportion of the textiles that the V&A held at this time. They were sent to Leeds City Museum and the Horniman museum, both ethnographic collections. The V&A also renewed its interest in British produced textiles aimed at the West African market with the acquisition in 2000 of the Hayes Collection of Nigerian headties (gele). This collection of textiles produced by a British company for sale in an independent Nigeria offered a post-colonial counterpoint to the 'wax prints' acquired in the middle of the century and were, like them, collected as an example of British design rather than as African fashion items.

### **9.1 Further Disposal**

In 1989 a process was begun which would result in the de-accessioning and removal of 52 Sub-Saharan African textiles from the V&A collection. This was the largest number of African textiles to be removed at one time from the collection. 30 of the textiles went to the Horniman Museum and 22 were given to Leeds City Museum, Department of Anthropology. Again, as in 1934, a Board of Survey was held, and again it was a long and convoluted process lasting years. The explanation for why it took so long can partly be found in the confusion caused by wide ranging reforms which were carried out at the V&A during the 1980s.

The first mention in the V&A archives about the removal of these textiles is a letter from Jennifer Wearden, a curator in the department of Textiles, Furnishing and Dress at the V&A to Keith Nicklin, Keeper of Ethnography at the Horniman museum dated 22 August 1989.

[W]e have identified about 20-30 African textiles (mainly West African) which no longer fall within the scope of the V&A's collection. We would like to transfer them to a more suitable collection and wondered is someone from your department could come to look through them and identify any you would be willing to accept.  
(V&A: RP/89/1679)

The Horniman Museum responded enthusiastically in a letter from Nicklin dated 30 September, expressing particular interest in Yoruba textiles which they needed for planned displays.

Leeds Museum had also been contacted at some point to discuss the potential transfer of textiles to them as a letter from Wearden to Veronica Johnston, the Curator of Anthropology dated 26 September 1989 shows:

I have checked through our records and as far as I can see there are not many Mary Kirby pieces among the ones we would like to transfer. I

have attached a complete list of the transfer material, marking those which were part of her collection. Would you or one of your colleagues be able to come to the V&A to look at these textiles so that we can note any pieces which you would like?  
(V&A: RP/89/1782)

It is clear from this letter that some preliminary work had already been done, a list had been made. However, there is no record of this process or how it was decided what to put on the list. Probably the list was drawn up by Wearden. There is a list of 71 objects in the files at Leeds City Museum dated 26 September 1989 that is likely to be this initial list that Wearden refers to. Johnston replied and confirmed that she would visit V&A to view the textiles on 6 October and explained what sort of items she wanted for the Leeds collection:

Apart from the Mary Kirby Collection, we would be particularly interested in the following, in order to fill gaps in our collections:  
anything from Ethiopia, Madagascar, Sudan, Ghana  
early/well-dated and documented items  
headwear  
trousers  
Obviously with the large numbers of Nigerian things and those just described as “West Africa”, it’s hard to know until I see them.  
(V&A: RP/89/1782)

Johnston was able to find almost everything on her list. The reason for the specific interest in the collection of Mary Kirby (see Chapter 8) is unclear from either the files in Leeds or V&A archive. Judging by her mother’s address Mary Kirby was from the Leeds area and may have been of interest to the Leeds City Museum as a local collector.

The comment about the number of textiles ‘Just described as “West Africa”’ draws attention again to the lack of knowledge about these pieces in the V&A. There was no expertise about African textiles at the V&A and Johnston during her visit was able to identify many of the textiles more specifically than they had been previously. She

was also able to make corrections, for example, it was Johnston who realised that Circ. 566-1967 and Circ. 326-1964 were Guatemalan rather than 'Scarf, Nigeria' and 'Scarf/Shawl West Africa' as they were listed in the V&A records. Johnston also correctly noted that many of the items listed as Nigerian had in fact come from other parts of West Africa. For example Circ.766-1967 was identified as Ghanaian and Circ.566-1967 as Sudanese, while West African sandals were reassigned as East African (1485 and 1486-1903) (Leeds Museum: Department of Anthropology/V&A file).

The list of 71 objects in the Leeds Museum records has 68 type written entries and three that have been added in by hand. Three of these textiles were removed from discussion about a possible transfer to Leeds as two of them were the Guatemalan pieces already mentioned and one was European. The whole list has been annotated with details of the textiles. These are presumably Johnston's notes from her visit. After her visit Johnston wrote to Wearden and sent a list of 44 items that she was definitely interested in for the Leeds collection and four pieces she referred to as 'Possibles, after further research or if not wanted elsewhere'. This list, referred to in the correspondence as 'List B' and dated 9 October 1989, is in the V&A archive (VA: RP/89/1782).

Georgina Russell who ran the study collections at the Horniman museum visited the V&A on 12 October 1989 and also made a detailed list of the textiles she viewed. She appears to have been offered those textiles not required by Leeds and some of those listed as 'possibles' by Johnston. The Horniman appear to take everything they were offered and ultimately received 30 textiles from the V&A.

Despite offering to take over 40 objects, Leeds ultimately only received 22 objects from the V&A. This seems to be due to the Textiles Department withdrawing these textiles from the list and deciding to keep them. Some of these changes are accounted for in the V&A archive files but many are not. On 9 November Wearden wrote to Johnston to explain that some of the textiles were no longer available.

May I confirm a couple of points:

1. Both T.357-1910 and TN.1954/66 were accepted by the Horniman.
2. 921-1873 and 924-1873 (both Abyssinian) are available. Do you still wish to have them?
3. I have been advised not to transfer the East African caps (showing the construction in progress) as they illustrate a technique not represented elsewhere in the collection. Consequently we are withdrawing these two items: Circ. 178toB-1952[sic 178toB-1962] and 179toB-1962. I'm sorry to have whetted your appetite (VA: RP/89/1782)

The two textiles listed as accepted by the Horniman were those listed as 'possibles' by Johnston. She was probably uncertain about these because there were three other white Nigerian robes (Circ.176-1962, 13-1900, and TN1951/5) on the list of 44 definitely requested items. Johnston comments on her list of 'possibles' that T.357-1910 and TN.1954/66 are 'similar to 13-1900', although ultimately 13-1900 did not go to Leeds either and remains in the V&A collection (VA: RP/89/1782). The 'Abyssinian' textiles were also both listed as 'possibles' and were both accepted by Leeds Museum. The East African caps are still in the V&A collection, the comments about these in the letter show the V&A's continued focus on technique.

In December 1989, Wearden set the wheels in motion for an official Board of Survey with a note to Nathalie Rothstein, Curator of Textiles. The process was broadly similar to the 1930s with a list being compiled and a committee of curators, including

the most senior curator from the relevant department and a curator from another department, formed to examine the pieces. Again, like the 1930s, the Museum seems a little unsure of the process because it was not something that was done regularly, as Wearden explained to Johnston and Nicklin in similar letters sent in November 1991.

The things that have happened to the paperwork would make an unbelievable saga ... [Jennifer Wearden's ellipses] the delay results from our unfamiliarity with the official procedure for decommissioning objects compounded with the sudden appearance of several black holes into which the papers vanished from sight.  
(VA: RP/89/1782 and V&A: RP/89/1679)

Unlike the 1930s, unless the objects were worth more than £10,000 (which none of these were) they did not have to be brought before the Museum Director or the Board of Trustees. Another significant difference is that this time the textiles department at the V&A had made sure they had somewhere to send the textiles to before they began the de-accessioning process officially.

The removal of objects from national museum collections was also controlled by Government legislation which allowed museums to sell, exchange or give away duplicates and 'objects unsuitable for retention'; and to remove damaged objects. This legislation also allowed for Museums to transfer objects between themselves and the transfer of objects to Leeds fell into this category (category c of the National Heritage Act 1983) as Wearden explained to Nathalie Rothstein, the Keeper of Textiles on 15 December 1989:

As you will see from the enclosed paper, the Dept. has a considerable number of textiles from sub-Saharan Africa which is an area outside the scope of our collecting policy. Most of the pieces were acquired by Regional Services. Apart from the fact that one or two of the cotton pieces are very dirty, the textiles are in very good condition.  
We would like to dispose of them by giving them to the ethnographic department of Leeds City Museum. Such a disposal

would be covered by Section 6 (3) (b) of the 1983 National Heritage Act.

The total value of this disposal is £6,565 and as such needs to be considered by yourself and a curator from another Department.

I will be able to show you the pieces in 110 [textiles store room].

If permission is granted for the disposal, Leeds City Museum will provide transport to collect all the textiles

(VA: RP/89/1782)

An almost identical memo was drawn up and sent to the Horniman museum at the same time, although the gifts to the Horniman were valued at only £1,120. This note pointed out that the textiles fell outside the collecting policy of the V&A but does not account for the presence of ‘a considerable number’ of textiles that the museum is officially not interested in.

On 31 December 1990 a Board of Survey is finally put together made up of Valerie Mendes (Curator, Textiles and Dress), Linda Parry (Deputy Curator, Textiles and Dress) and Rosemary Crill (Deputy Curator, Indian and South East Asian collection). In her note to John Murdoch (Keeper of Prints and Drawings) asking for permission for a Board of Survey, Mendes writes of the African collections that: ‘They are all non-controversial suggestions for disposal and in each case would go to museum homes who are extremely keen to add them to their appropriate collections. We no longer collect in the areas concerned.’ (VA: RP/89/1782.) The statement that the museum is ‘no longer’ interested in Africa is important because it implies a change; the museum had collected African material at some point but was not interested in it anymore.

Despite the ‘non-controversial’ nature of this removal of the 71 textiles that the Board of Survey looked at only 52 are eventually given to Leeds and the Horniman. The



rest remain in the collection to this day. Unfortunately, few details about how these decisions were made are available. Those that were to be sent to Leeds are all listed under the stock phrase 'Inappropriate to the Collection' on the official paperwork, those sent to the Horniman are missing their paperwork, while those that stayed have nothing written about them at all. No notes were archived about the reasoning behind these decisions. It is generally unclear why some pieces are kept and others are let go although in some cases it is possible to hazard guesses. For example, in the case of the white Nigerian robes mentioned above it might be that of three similar items (13-1900, Circ.176-1962 and TN1951/5) it was only worthwhile keeping one (Circ.13-1900). Possibly the Nigerian shawl (T.230-1923) was kept because the level of open work in Tiv weaving is not seen in many other traditions and therefore may have been kept as an example of an unusual technique. In other cases it is hard to understand why certain things were retained and others removed. Why were both Madagascan weaving samples (LEEDM.F.1992.0004.0009 and LEEDM.F.1992.0004.0004) removed? Why were the West African caps (T.246-1966, T.248-1966 and T.249-1966) all kept?

Perhaps most intriguing of all is the last minute decision to keep 266-1890, the embroidered robe given by a Mrs Foy (See Chapter 5). The final Board of Survey report form lists 23 textiles that are to be given to Leeds Museum but one of them (266-1890) has had a line put through it, the handwritten note 'retain in V&A' and has been initialled VM and RC (Valerie Mendes and Rosemary Crill). Why is this robe given a last minute reprieve? Although it is a very interesting and attractive robe it is hard to see why it is of particular importance to the V&A particularly given that it is similar to another robe in the collection (1110-1898) and therefore is unlikely to have

been kept as an example of a technique not otherwise represented in the collection. It is possible that the Board of Survey Committee were unaware of the existence of the similar robe. This same robe (266-1890) was given to the British Museum in 1953 by the V&A. but the V&A requested its return and the British Museum duly obliged. It is possible that the committee became aware of this earlier incident and felt it would be wrong to give it to somebody other than the British Museum, or maybe they simply felt that if the V&A had wanted it so much in the 1950s it probably wanted it still.

The timing of this removal in the late 1980s is significant, it probably occurred at this time for two reasons. Firstly, most of the pieces that were removed had been acquired by the Circulation Department which no longer existed. Secondly, the V&A was undergoing restructuring at this time and for the first time an official collection policy was put in place. Wearden, in a note to Mendes (the newly appointed Curator of Textiles and Dress) in July 1990 seems to back up this argument by emphasising both the origins of the pieces in the Circulation Department and the official collection policy.

90% of [the] textiles are from Circ. but I have added similar pieces from 110 [textiles store room].

Our collecting policy explains that we do not collect West or East African textiles – and with the exception of a type of knotting from East Africa, we should consider giving them to a more suitable collection.

(VA: RP/89/1782)

When it came to Africa, ‘a more suitable collection’ still meant an ethnographic collection.

### **Closure of the Circulation Department**

In 1975 the Circulation Department and the Education Department were merged under the new title of Department of Regional Services. The aim of this was to refresh the department and offer more services to the regional museums that looked to the V&A for help. 'It aimed to go beyond the accepted practice of just shipping groups of objects out to borrowing institutions, by providing "road shows" of educational activity to enhance the exhibitions.' (Burton 1999: 228). However, the following year Harold Wilson's government, facing an economic crisis instituted a policy of 11% staff cuts across the Civil Service. At this time, the V&A staff were all Civil Servants and so it was necessary to get rid of about 80 members of staff. Roy Strong, the Director of the V&A at this time, chose to close the entire Regional Services Department rather than lose a small number of people from each department. It has been suggested that Strong hoped that by proposing to lose an entire department the Government would back down from its insistence on the cuts. If this was the case it failed. Over the next two years the Regional Services Department was wound down and its collections redistributed among the relevant departments. (Burton 1999: 229).

All but three of the textiles which were eventually removed from the V&A that post-date the creation of the Circulation Collection in the 1920s were acquired by that department. As we have seen the Circulation Department was able to operate outside of the usual V&A boundaries. In the main the sort of collecting the Circulation department had done, notably contemporary material, was now taken on by the relevant departments who were obliged to spend a certain proportion of their budget on objects made after 1920, thereby bringing contemporary works back into the mainstream of the museums activity (Burton 1999: 224). However, the more esoteric aspects of the Circulation Department's collecting were not taken up by the other

curatorial departments. As outlined in chapter 8 the Circulation Department had been responsible for most of the African textiles that the V&A collected over the years, and once it was gone these textiles no longer had a clear place in the museum collection.

Although the decision to remove the African textiles comes over a decade after the closure of the Circulation Department, it was made as a direct result of that closure.

Wearden explained in her original letter to Nicklin that:

We have recently completed the physical transfer of 20<sup>th</sup> century textiles from the old Regional Services' stores to our own textile department stores and we have identified about 20-30 African textiles, (mainly West African) which no longer fall within the scope of the V&A's collection. (V&A 89/1679)

Even though the Circulation Collection textiles had been in the care of the Textile Department since the closure of the Circulation Department it was over a decade later that the textiles were finally moved and the issue became pressing.

### **Change in the Museum**

Another factor in the decision to remove these textiles from the V&A at this time was the difficult situation the museum as a whole was facing and the development of a clear collection policy at this time. Even after the 11% staff cuts of the 1970s and the decision to introduce admission charges in 1985 the museum was short of money (Burton 1999 231). In March 1988, under the new Director Elizabeth Esteve-Coll a working party was set up to find a way of restructuring the museum to reduce the cost of staff by £750,000 (Burton 1999: 233). One of the results of Esteve-Coll's changes was the introduction of a clearly laid out Acquisitions Policy and Collecting Plans in 1993. The introduction section of this document explains:

At the beginning of 1988 the Museum embarked on a process of restructuring, an intrinsic part of which was the development and implementation of a collection management policy covering all its collections... The first step in introducing this policy was a formal statement of the Acquisitions Policy of the Board of Trustees which was adopted in July 1989.

(V&A: Acquisitions Policy and Collecting Plans (1993))

The formal statement of the Board of Trustees from 1989 began by saying that 'The V&A collects objects illustrating and documenting the history of art, craft and design.' (V&A: Acquisitions Policy of the Board of Trustees 1989). It went on to define the geographical boundaries of the collection as follows:

Objects are collected from all major artistic traditions of Europe, Asia and North Africa. Objects from Oceania, Africa, other than North Africa and the Americas are only collected when they relate to or throw light on the European tradition.

(V&A: Acquisitions Policy of the Board of Trustees 1989).

This policy makes clear the division which had existed since the 1930s between North African art and Sub-Saharan African ethnography. This was confirmed in 1993 when the Acquisition Policy and Collecting Plan was finally completed. The Textiles and Dress section of the report contained the following note under the heading 'Disposals: Textiles and Dress follows Museum policy and in recent times has transferred ethnographical material to the Horniman Museum and to the Leeds City Museum.' African material was regarded as ethnographic and had no place in the V&A.

The changes in structure and staffing had another effect on the transfer of these textiles to Leeds and the Horniman: delay. The reason for the delay was the retirement of Rothstein from her position as the most senior curator in the Textiles Department. As part of the ambitious restructuring programme nine senior staff members, including five Keepers were offered voluntary redundancy and departments

amalgamated. In 1989 the department became known as the Department Textiles and Dress with the Senior Curator of Textiles as the most senior staff member responsible for textiles. Wearden had written to Johnston and Nicklin explaining that she felt it would be better to wait until Rothstein's replacement was in position before proceeding (V&A: RP/89/1782 and V&A:RP/89/1679)).

As well as looking at why the V&A wanted to dispose of these textiles it is also worth considering why other collections wanted them. Leeds City Museum was founded in 1819 by the Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society and opened to the public in 1821. The anthropological collection is made up of non-British material (including African, Asian, American, Pacific and European Folk) from the nineteenth and twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> Some of the anthropological collecting dates back to the Museum's founding years but the majority of the material has been acquired since the 1960s when it was decided to expand the collection (Lovelace Online).

Johnston, as Leeds City Museum Curator of Anthropology from 1983 to 1997, significantly expanded the collection in general and textiles in particular. At a time when many Museums were looking to reduce their collections in order to control costs Johnston was actively seeking to expand the collection in Leeds. In the late 1980s Leeds accepted a large number of items from a variety of different institutions keen to hone down their collections, notably Worthing Museum and Hampshire County Council, so it is not surprising that the majority of textiles removed by the V&A at this time should go to the anthropological department at Leeds City Museum rather than some other ethnographic collection.

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<sup>1</sup> They continue to collect contemporary material – a vuvuzela which had become an iconic symbol of the 2010 World Cup in South Africa had been purchased in the week of my visit on 25 June 2010.

The transfer of African material from the V&A to the Department of Anthropology at Leeds City Museum has had positive outcomes but it has also raised some problematic issues about how Africa was viewed at the end of the twentieth century. On the positive side the material in Leeds City Museum is much more accessible than it would be if it had remained in the V&A. In 2008 Leeds City Museum re-opened in the old Leeds Institute building in the centre of the city, following a Heritage Lottery Funded redevelopment programme. The space showcasing the anthropological collections is known as the World View gallery and every five years the theme and content of the gallery will be changed completely. Antonia Lovelace, the current Curator of Anthropology at Leeds City Museum chose 'Out of Africa' to be the first five year theme (2008-2013), owing partly to the presence of exhibits about Asia in other museums in the region. The World View: Out of Africa Gallery is described on the Leeds City Museum website.

With 6.5 billion people living in the world today there are thousands of cultures spread over the world's five continents. The 'World View' gallery's opening exhibition focuses on Africa. This will run until 2013.

The African displays look at migration, colourful crafts and textiles, masks and masquerade costumes, musical instruments and an 'Africa Now' display. Have fun trying on the traditional African costumes and masks and even have a go at playing the drums.

(Leeds City Museum (Online))

Section four of this gallery is called 'Costume and Craft' and is made up of cases that run along the whole of the galleries back wall. Several (at least seven on 25/06/2010) examples of cloth garments and textiles are displayed in this case. Currently none of the textiles transferred from the V&A are displayed, but there is a plan to rotate the textiles over the five year period. Three of the V&A pieces are on the list compiled

by Lovelace for potential inclusion in the display: LEEDM.F.1992.0004.0009 (previously AP2-1882) a sample of Madagascan Silk Weaving, LEEDM.F.1992.0004.0006 (previously Circ.576-1967) an Asante strip woven cloth, and a Fulani blanket (LEEDM.F.1992.0004.0006, previously Circ.313-1964). Although inclusion on this list is not a guarantee that these pieces will be displayed before the end of this current exhibition's run in 2013, In addition, LEEDM.F.1992.4.10 (previously Circ.176-1962) a white cotton agbada with yellowish-white embroidery is currently on loan to the Wilberforce House Museum in Hull and is displayed in the section of the museum about West African life and culture.

The transfer of these textiles from the V&A to both the Leeds City Museum and the Horniman Museum raises an important question. Both the museum in Leeds and the Horniman are ethnographic or anthropological collections. The attitude towards Africa that existed at the V&A in the late 1980s and 1990s had arisen out of the idea that African artefacts could only be of interest from an ethnographic point of view and not from an art and design perspective. This attitude had its own roots in notions of racial hierarchy that had begun in the nineteenth century and impacted upon the museum's collecting decisions. Although the Circulation Department had, to some extent, questioned this in the 1960s and 1970s once the Department no longer existed the idea of African textiles being interesting from a design perspective disappeared from the museum. These pieces were removed from the V&A in the 1990s on the grounds that it was 'inappropriate to the collection'; on the one hand it is possible to argue that they will be better used in museums with a history of collecting and expertise in African textiles. However, this inevitably means an



ethnographic collection, and by continuing to repeat this pattern of removing Africa from the world of art and design and placing it firmly in the world of ethnography the V&A implicitly confirms the stereotype of Africa as a place that does not produce anything worthy of the title 'art.'

### **Summary**

In the late 1980s, as the V&A was reassessed itself and laid out more clearly its precise aims and areas of interest, a decision to officially exclude Sub-Saharan African material from its collecting policy was made. Although there may have been an understanding to that effect within the museum since at least the 1920s, this represents the earliest example of a written statement to that effect found in the archive to date. This led directly to the removal of 51 African textiles from the V&A to ethnographic collections, although not all African textiles were removed. This emphasised the ongoing divide between art and design and ethnography.

## 9.2: The Hayes Collection

On 31 March 2000 the V&A accepted a donation of 48 headties and five design drawings from the trustees of the estate of Mr. D.A. Butler. The 'headties' referred to are gele and are a popular form of head dress among Nigerian women. They had been made by Hayes Textiles, a British manufacturing company that specialised in the production of gele. In the official justification required for acquisition and recorded in CMS Jennifer Wearden described them thus:

Almost all these are jacquard-woven silk from Switzerland and are of the highest quality. They were produced for Hayes Textiles Limited who sold them in Nigeria; they were the market leaders until Mr. Butler's recent death. Their silk moth trade mark has been sold to another company. (V&A: RF/2000/298)

She went on to justify their acquisition: 'This small collection of woven textiles from Nigeria will compliment our existing group of printed cottons for export to West Africa.' (V&A: RF/2000/298) The V&A was interested in the Hayes textiles as examples of British design. They had, however, acquired an archive of an important part of twentieth century Nigerian fashion as well as evidence of the complicated cultural relationship between Britain and Nigeria and of transnational processes at work. The V&A records state that as well as being made in Switzerland some of the samples were also manufactured in Japan and Korea.

At the same time that the textile samples and design drawings were given to the V&A, a collection of textile swatches and some other material relating to the design of these textiles was given to the London College of Fashion (LCF) , University of the Arts London. The LCF website states that the company was based at:

Vencourt Place, 261/271 King Street, London, specialised in high quality Jacquard Fabrics and the production of Nigerian headwear. The Directors were D A Butler, S Ryman and M J Nettleton. On the death of the founder D A Butler, the company closed.  
(<http://www.arts.ac.uk/library/archives-collections/lcf>)

An exhibition based around the material in the Hayes archive held at LCF in October 2005 entitled *Transposing Boundaries and Sharing Cultures* explained in its publicity that:

The most lavish and elaborately tied headscarves reflected the status of the wearer and as such the founder of Hayes Textile Ltd, D. A. Butler, supplemented his fabrics with a starch-like compound allowing for larger and more intricately tied headwear. Uniquely, the fabric was only sold in Nigeria.  
(LCF Online b)

The impact of this British company on the development of Nigerian fashion is potentially very important. More research needs to be done on the company in particular, and the development of gele as fashionable dress in general, to fully establish this company's place in the history. Unfortunately this work falls outside the scope of this particular research project.

The textiles in the V&A and the Hayes archive at LCF reveal something about the companies design process. The designs are eclectic, drawing on sources from all around the world and sometimes lifting images wholesale from books, magazines and postcards and reproducing them on textiles. A clear example of this process can be found in the V&A collection. T.129:1-2000 is jacquard woven silk, the background is dark blue and the design depicts a repeating fairy-tale castle in black, mauve and silver (Fig. 9.1). Accessioned with this headtie was a design drawing for it together with what appears to be an image torn from a magazine from which the design is taken (Fig. 9.2).



Fig. 9.1: Gele, Hayes Textiles Ltd., woven silk, made in Switzerland for the Nigerian market. V&A: T.129:1-2000.

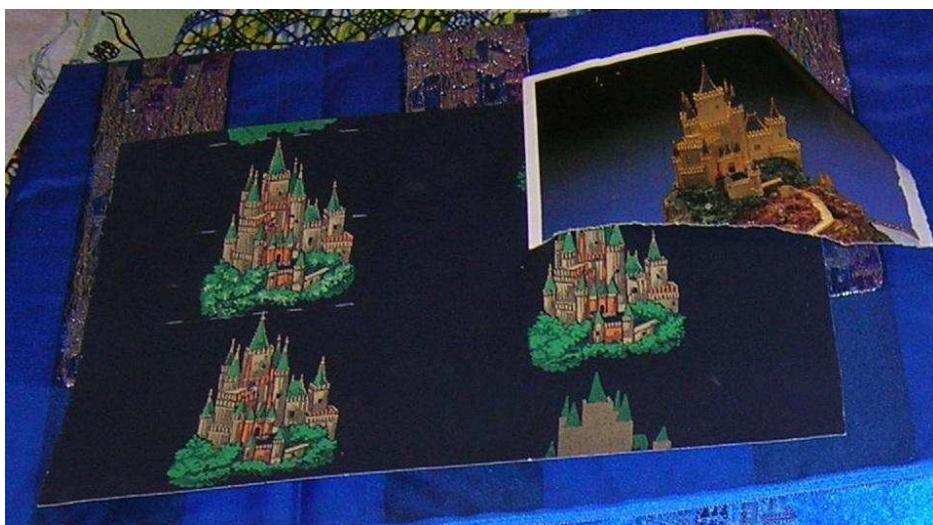


Fig. 9.2: Design drawing for Hayes Textiles Ltd. V&A: 129:2-2000

Other examples of this from the Hayes archive include aeroplanes taken directly from Swiss Air postcards and Japanese imagery taken from books (Hayes Archive).

The textile swatches in the Hayes archive at LCF and in the V&A collection reveal an amazing array of designs. In order to start developing a typology of these textiles it is worth starting with the classification systems that have been used for 'wax prints' for West Africa, as they are also textiles produced by European companies for a West African market. Nielsen identified eight categories of pattern that are used on these 'wax prints'. She lists these as Indian cottons, Javanese batiks, European prints, African indigenous cloth, traditional African objects and symbols, historical/current events or people, natural forms and geometrical designs. (Nielsen 1979: 482-484)

The influence of Indian cottons can still be seen in the use of boteh or 'paisley print' on designs. The example in the V&A (T.91-2000) shows four colour-ways woven in one piece. However, by the mid-twentieth century when Hayes Textiles Ltd went into production this image was as much seen as British paisley as it was Indian boteh. Designs influenced by Javanese batiks cannot be found in the Hayes textiles; this is perhaps because it would be difficult to replicate the effect of batik on woven fabrics such as these. European prints, taken to mean classic European textile patterns are also absent. However, what might be termed stereotypical European and British imagery was used on the cloths. T.101-2000 depicts a 'Nordic scene'. It has a red back ground with a repeating pattern of hills covered in fir trees in gold. T.124-200 in the V&A collection depicts the head and shoulders of a British Guardsman in his distinctive bearskin cap and holding a bayonet on a yellow background (Fig. 9.3). A second example of the same pattern on a grey background is also in the V&A

collection. (T.125-2000) This pattern is called 'Bear hat' in the Hayes archive and given the number 15315. A second headtie in the V&A collection, T.113-2000 is also an example of traditional British imagery. It features a Tudor Rose, this pattern is given the numbers 11420 and 11520 (Hayes archive). Other examples of British imagery in the Hayes archive include Big Ben, the Underground Logo and Queen Elizabeth II.

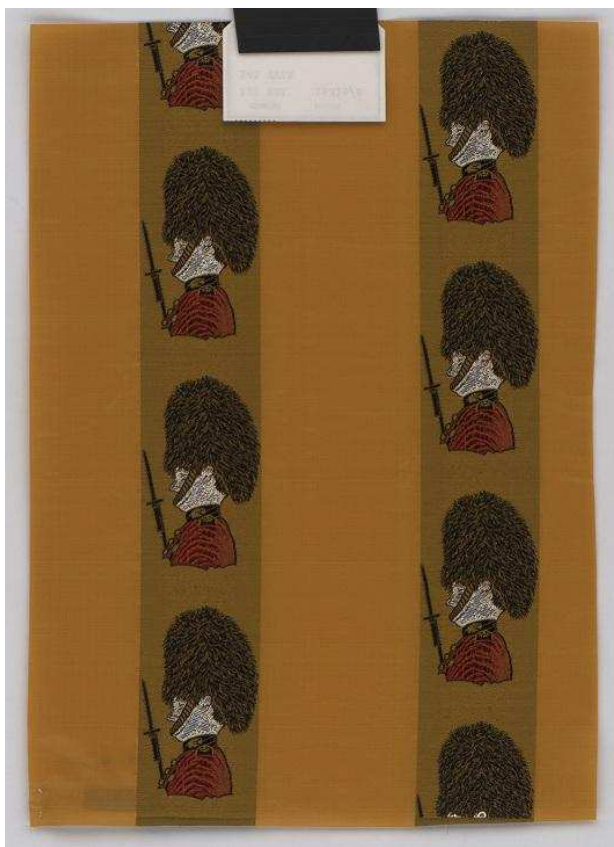


Fig. 9.3: Gele Sample, Hayes Textiles Ltd., woven silk, made in Switzerland for the Nigerian market. V&A: T.124-2000.

In fact it is not only British or European stereotypes that are featured; images are pulled from across the world. For example, design 75089 features the Statue of Liberty (Hayes archive) while T.116-2000 in the V&A depicts a Chinese pagoda (Fig. 9.4). Japanese inspired designs also feature heavily, for example the cherry tree



pattern on T.121-2000. The influence of Japanese art can also be seen on examples at LCF. The archive also includes material that was used to design the headties and includes three books about Japanese art with many of the images carefully cut out of it.



Fig. 9.4: Gele Sample, Hayes Textiles Ltd., woven silk, made in Switzerland for the Nigerian market. V&A: T.116-2000.

Indigenous cloth is one of Nielsen's categories, and there are many patterns in the Hayes archive based on strip weaving. One of the examples in the V&A, T.117-200 has clearly been designed to imitate narrow strip weaving from West Africa with its geometric patterns arranged in stripes. The sample includes the same design in three different colourways, orange, green and red (Fig. 9.5). There are also designs based on popular 'wax prints'. Although these patterns could not be termed indigenous they have certainly come to be 'traditional'. For example the design numbered 70021 in the Hayes archive, which features letters and clocks is clearly based on the 'Alphabet' pattern of wax prints. Designs 70022 and 75101 are also based on wax prints (Hayes archive).



Fig. 9.5: Gele Sample in a variety of colourways, Hayes Textiles Ltd., woven silk, made in Switzerland for the Nigerian market. V&A: T.117-2000.

African objects and symbols also feature to some degree on the Hayes textiles. For example, Comb (Hayes 15134) and Mask (Hayes 15290). An example in the V&A (T.130:1-2000) also shows a pattern of umbrellas which could also be regarded as an African object. When Barbara Morris made a tentative typology of ‘wax prints’ in the 1970s so prevalent were images of umbrellas she gave them their own category (see Chapter 7). Flamingo 284 and 183 swatches in the Hayes archive are both umbrellas but slightly different to the umbrellas in the V&A. The sample in the V&A also has its design drawing with it (Fig. 9.6).

The historical or current events category is represented by the portrait of Queen Elizabeth II mentioned above and the Nigerian flag (Hayes 65041/5). Nielsen’s final two categories of natural forms and geometric patterns also feature in the Hayes



headties. Numerous examples in the V&A have floral designs on them such as T.112-2000, T.120-2000 and T.121-2000 while T.122-2000 depicts rows of large fish outlining a shoal of smaller fish. T.114-2000 could be an example of a geometric pattern as was T.92-2000, a design known as ‘Carpet’.



Fig. 9.6: Gele Sample with design drawing, Hayes Textiles Ltd., woven silk, made in Switzerland for the Nigerian market. V&A: T.117-2000.

Nielsen’s typology for ‘wax prints’ cannot be straightforwardly applied to these textiles but it has given some useful pointers. Natural forms and geometrical designs figure but are too broad to be useful categories, imitations of African cloth exist (although wax print designs themselves should be included in this even though not strictly indigenous), African objects also appear and historical or current events and people also feature. However, while the ‘*boteh*’ pattern from Indian cotton continues to appear there are no clear links to either Javanese batiks or European textiles. What

we see instead are images associated with the UK and Europe but used in a way they were not traditionally used in European textile design. We also see imagery being drawn from a much wider range of places, such as the USA, Japan and China. This reflects the increasingly globalised world of the second half of the twentieth century.

Two important categories of Hayes designs have not yet been mentioned: one is the use of logos of big international companies such as Mercedes Benz (Hayes 15292) and American Express (Hayes 12194) which were reproduced on Hayes textiles with an apparent disregard for copyright. A final group of textiles features aeroplanes (Hayes 12254), trains (Hayes 12271/12272) and space rockets (Hayes 15320). While these are all methods of transport, the important theme they represent is modernity and an allusion to wealth. The company logos too should be understood as symbols of aspirational modernity as perhaps should the landmarks from around the world.

These textiles reveal to us the ongoing trade relationship between Britain and Nigeria post-independence and the development of an iconic Nigerian fashion. As with the earlier 'wax prints' we see a British company working hard to meet the desires of their African clientele. Their designs may tell us something about Nigeria in this period but work is needed to accurately date the designs and research the reception of various designs. We do not know which of these many designs proved popular.

## **Summary**

The collection of Hayes headties in the V&A are an important collection in their own right. What is important for understanding the presence of these textiles in the collection is that they were collected, like the 'wax prints' earlier, as examples of

British design. However, they are also an archive of Nigerian fashion and represent the ongoing relationship between Britain and Nigeria. The V&A again finds itself with an interesting collection of African textiles. By collecting these examples of British design history the V&A it cannot but help reflect the design histories of other parts of the world.

## Conclusion

This research has contextualised the African textile collection in the V&A within the wider frames of the museum's history and development and Britain's engagement with Africa. In order to do this it was necessary to identify and describe the collection of African textiles as a whole for the first time, making extensive use of the textiles themselves and the museum archives. The collection has to a large extent been 'hidden' and deserves to be better known as it contains many interesting pieces and some that are unique.

In 2008 Helen Mears who had worked on the V&A's African collections in her role as Heritage Lottery Funded African Diaspora Research Fellow wrote

The idea that, simply, "The V&A does not collect African art" is prevalent and is presented as fact by Museum visitors, front-of-house staff, even curators who have all been heard stating the 'fact' that the V&A does not hold African material in its permanent collections. This 'fact' may on first glance seem self-evident in the layout of the Museum, which has galleries devoted to the art and design of South Asia; Southeast Asia and the Himalayas; the Islamic Middle East; China; Japan and Korea but none to any African country or region.  
(Mears 2008)

This attitude was perhaps unsurprising given that as late as 2009 the V&A Collections Management Policy defined the geographical boundaries of the collection thus:

Objects are collected from all major artistic traditions. The Museum does not normally collect pre-European settlement material from the Americas and Australasia. The Museum does not collect historic material from Oceania and Africa south of the Sahara.  
(V&A 2012 Appendix 1)

This not only excluded historic material, disregarding the African objects in its collection, it also assumed that Africa did not have a 'major artistic tradition,' implying that African material was not worthy of an art museum.

One of the key questions of this thesis is why the V&A did not collect African material and why, if that is the case, they have African textiles in their collection. Mears went on to point out that

[M]any V&A galleries include a significant amount of material from African countries: Glass (Room 131) for example displays more than 150 pieces of early Egyptian glassware. Textiles (Rooms 98, 99 and 100) also presents Egyptian material in the form of nearly 300 woven textiles and textile fragments, thirteen pieces of Moroccan embroidery and two late 19<sup>th</sup>-century men's robes, one from the Gambia and one from Liberia. Islamic Middle East (Room 42) displays include more than 50 items from Egypt and other North African countries and the British Galleries feature a Tunisian Sash.  
(Mears 2008)

Most of the material listed is from North Africa, Egypt in particular, and as we have seen North Africa was treated very differently to the rest of the continent.

The V&A first began collecting textiles from North Africa in 1852 when it purchased, from the Great Exhibition, a selection of Tunisian textiles. These textiles set a precedent in terms of what textiles were collected in that they were from the urban centres and had stylistic links to pieces from other parts of the Arab world. They were different to many of the pieces collected later because they were examples of weaving rather than needlework. The V&A began collecting North African embroidery during the late nineteenth century and in the early twentieth century particularly under A.F. Kendrick and A.J.B. Wace. This reflected a wider interest in needlework generally in the newly formed Textiles Department. The V&A's interest continued to be focused on art from the cities as they have closer ties to the Arab world than rural North Africa, and this is reflected in their artistic output.

From the 1880s onward the V&A amassed a large and impressive collection of textiles from Egyptian burial grounds, brought to light by archaeological excavations. They differ significantly from the other textiles in the collection due to their age. The interest in Egypt does not seem to contribute to an interest in North Africa more generally. Egypt is its own category.

Although the museum was more interested in North African textiles during the nineteenth century than cloth from other parts of the continent, it was not deliberately excluding material from Sub-Saharan Africa. The first textiles from Sub-Saharan Africa to be acquired were from Ethiopia and they were accessioned in 1869 as a direct result of the Battle of Meqdala. The spoils of war are an important aspect of the development of museum collections in Britain. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century the V&A continued to acquire textiles from Sub-Saharan Africa when the opportunity arose, West Africa particularly. These textiles reflect, in various ways, Britain's increasing and ongoing involvement in Africa.

It is not until the 1920s that we start to see the question of whether material should be considered 'ethnographic' or not. Contributing factors to this are the need for the V&A to think more carefully about what it collects and to define the difference between itself and the British Museum. In 1933, as part of a general thinning of the collection the Textiles Department removed a significant proportion of African textiles from the museum. This process was repeated again in 1989 and is one of the most important things to consider in relation to African textiles in the V&A. More African textiles have been removed from the collection than currently exist in it.

After the Second World War the Circulation Department began to collect 'wax prints' to loan to art and design schools. This coincided with the decline in the production of these prints. This aspect of the collection was added to in 2000 with the acquisition of the Hayes headties. Both were collected as examples of British design. The Circulation Department also began to collect textiles produced in West Africa, perhaps spurred on by the popularity of the 'wax print' sets and the Mary Kirby bequest. Again, these were loaned to art schools and not used for the exhibitions that toured regional museums and galleries. They seem to have felt that 'ethnographic' material had something to teach about design, reflecting the views of Henry Cole on 'primitive art' in the nineteenth century. The Circulation Department also toured African material from other museums, notably an Ethiopian exhibition arranged with the Horniman. This exhibition was ethnographic and nothing from it was accessioned by the V&A despite the use of their money to acquire the objects.

Following the closure of the Circulation Department in the late 1970s the African textiles had no clear place in the collection and in 1992 52 of them were removed. The collection policy, published in 1993 stated that 'Objects from Oceania, Africa, other than North Africa and the Americas are only collected when they relate to or throw light on the European tradition' (V&A: Acquisitions Policy and Collecting Plans (1993)). By the end of the twentieth century it appeared that the V&A had no interest in collecting material from Sub-Saharan Africa.

The collecting of African textiles at the V&A was generally a haphazard affair. It is not always clear why textiles were accessioned and then later removed or kept. The lack of specialism in African textiles also created a number of problems with objects

being misattributed and mislabelled. A large amount of time has been spent merely identifying what is there. It also sometimes appears as though a lack of care has been taken; some objects are lost and some have become 'detached' from the donor's records. However, this is not only a problem for the Africa collections at the V&A but something that present day researchers often experience when using archives and collections. It is tempting to judge the curators of yesterday by today's standards but the temptation should be resisted and the very different context in which they worked should be remembered. It is also important to remember that the existence of this research and the V&A's support of it are very much a reflection of current concerns.

Running through much of the V&A's thinking about Africa, at least from the 1920s until 2000 was the division between art museums and ethnographic collections.

Ethnography as a discipline is closely related to anthropology which developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and sought to study foreign peoples and their way of life scientifically. Ethnographic museums sought to display the results of anthropological study, and by ordering objects contributed to the development of this field (Miller 1994). Art museums, on the other hand, valued objects for their formal aesthetic qualities. Unfortunately a value judgement on the people who made these objects has come to be associated with this division, but the division between the two categories has not been hard and fast.

In 1988 James Clifford wrote that:

Since the turn of the century objects collected from non-western sources have been classified in two major categories: as (scientific) cultural artefacts or as (aesthetic) works of art. Other collectables – mass produced commodities, 'tourist art', curios, and so on – have been less



systematically valued; at best they find a place in exhibits of 'technology' or 'folklore'. The system classifies objects and assigns them relative value. It establishes the 'contexts' in which they properly belong and between which they circulate.  
(Clifford 1994: 262)

Clifford identifies four categories of object each with its own associated context, authentic 'masterpieces' which belong in art museums, authentic artefacts which belong in ethnographic museums, inauthentic 'masterpieces' and inauthentic artefacts. Crucially, though, he argues that objects can and frequently do move between categories. He also emphasises the historical specificity of the division and its potential to change over time.

To some extent the V&A was actually well placed to avoid the entire debate on whether an object was an ethnographic artefact or an art work because it was not a fine-art museum. The V&A collected decorative arts, designed objects and focussed on how objects were made. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century they frequently acquire textiles as examples of technique sidestepping the whole art or ethnography debate. The Circulation Department too seem unconcerned about the ethnography debate. However, during the 1920s and 1930s the V&A Textiles Department do begin to exclude pieces on the grounds that they are ethnographic. This occurs in a wider context of anthropology and ethnography being properly recognised as academic disciplines and a concern not to duplicate the work of the British Museum. Once the precedent had been set it seemed hard to shake off.

The debate between art and ethnography dogged the study of African material culture but since the late 1980s there has been increased questioning of the two categories. For example the 1988 exhibition curated by Susan Vogel at the Center for African Art

in New York called ART/Artifact: African art in anthropology collections which sought to question visitor's assumptions about the difference between art and anthropological artefact by demonstrating how different settings encourage the viewer to see different meanings in an object. While in 1994 Arnoldi and Hardin argued that the looking at objects as either art or ethnography was unhelpful and that a combined approach needed to be taken. Increasingly museums are taking a more rounded approach towards objects with many ethnographic museums collecting and working with contemporary artists and fine art museums looking more at an object's wider context.

The V&A has not been immune to changes taking place in museum and the understanding of material culture and since 2000 it has been possible to see a clear change in the V&A's attitude towards Africa. Following a major Heritage Lottery Funded (HLF) project addressing Cultural Ownership and Capacity Building, which included a Research Fellow post devoted to researching African objects in the collection, the V&A now has a number of articles on its website devoted to African objects in the museum's collection and the history of those objects. Crucially the current V&A Collections and Development Policy contains a section called Africa Collecting Strategy (V&A 2012: 66). This document highlights the work of the HLF project in uncovering the African material in the V&A and acknowledges that historically a lot of African artefacts have been removed from the collection.

As a result of the African Diaspora research project, however, the V&A as a whole must now conceive of itself as the guardian of a significant collection of Africa-related art and design. An Africa Curators Group was established in January 2009 with the task of co-ordinating the Museum's approach to this material and to develop a curatorial programme for its development.

(V&A 2012: 66)

The Africa curators group meets regularly and includes at least one representative from each department. It has been active in promoting the display of African objects in the museum (see below).

The collecting strategy goes on to lay out its collecting plans for Africa

We will develop our existing historical collections primarily through gallery-, publication- and web-based projects rather than through collecting. The exception is North Africa, for which the Museum will continue to expand both its historical and its contemporary collections along the same lines as Asia.  
(V&A 2012: 67)

North Africa remains an exception; this is due to the V&A continuing to build on existing collections. In addition, the North African textiles have recently been moved from the care of the Textile collection into the Middle East section of the Asian Department. In some ways this makes sense, but it does serve to further emphasise the historical division between North and Sub-Saharan Africa and makes the African pieces that remain in the Textile Department more of an anomaly.

For the rest of Africa, for the African diaspora and for the African impact on non-African art and design, we will concentrate collecting activity in 20th-century and contemporary design, graphic arts, photography, performance arts and other fields for which the V&A holds a nationally recognized remit.  
(V&A 2012: 67)

The V&A holds the National Collection for both fashion and textiles opening up the exciting possibility of African acquisitions in the future (V&A 2012).

In 2010 there was talk of developing a gallery space within the museum devoted to temporary exhibitions relating to Africa and the African diasporas.<sup>1</sup> This plan, which involved transforming the Visitor Centre (room 19a) into an Africa at the V&A gallery has since been adjusted to holding a different Africa themed exhibition every year from 2012 to 2015. The first display is due to open on 15 November 2012 and will draw on this research and work done by Helen Mears under the HLF project mentioned above. The display is entitled V&A Africa: Exploring Hidden Histories and it seeks to showcase the African objects in the V&A's collection and address some of the issues around the acquisition of these objects. Textiles from both North and Sub-Saharan Africa will be included in this exhibition. The second exhibition (2013) will showcase some of the V&A's collection of prints and posters from Africa and the African diaspora. The Word and Image Department at the V&A has been actively collecting prints from Africa and by artists of the African diaspora for over twenty years. There will be a publication to accompany this display. The theme of the third exhibition (2013) has not yet been decided (as of 1 October 2012).

None of this work or these changes would have been possible without the work of Dinah Winch, a curator at the V&A, who while working on the redevelopment of the museum's British Galleries became frustrated with the idea that the V&A simply did not have anything relating to Africa in its collection. In 2000 and with the assistance of her colleague Mary Guyatt, she set about disproving it. They came up with a list of approximately 3,000 objects which formed the starting point both for the HLF project (2005-2008) and this PhD. There was only a period of eight years between the V&A

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<sup>1</sup> Eithne Nightingale (Head of Access, Social Inclusion and Community Development at the V&A) at "From the Margins to the Core" conference. V&A 26 March 2010

disposing of a large proportion of its African textiles and Dinah Winch deciding to bring what remained to light.

So from 1992, when the V&A removed a substantial proportion of its African textiles to 2000 when a process was begun to bring to light the African artefacts in the museum, had something changed? The critical, social and museological landscape had altered considerably, with museums asking new questions and having a whole new range of demands made on them by academics, the government and the public.

Particularly relevant to this research was a new understanding of museums that was evolving. It developed first in academia and then made its way down to the gallery floors. Towards the end of the 1980s and during the 1990s the study of museums became both more common and more diverse in the topics that it looked at. This new interest in museums was partly motivated by a perceived crisis in museums during the 1980s, of which the staff cuts and restructuring at the V&A were symptomatic. An important book from this time was *The New Museology* edited by Peter Vergo (1989). In the introduction, Vergo argued that museums needed to re-examine radically their own role within society if they were to remain relevant and avoid becoming 'living fossils' (Vergo 1989a: 3). The rapid expansion of museum studies during the 1990s and up to the present has been partly a response to these problems, but also a response to an academic shift in which researchers and curators sought to apply the theories of post-modernism to our understanding of museums and to their own practices. Since the publication of *The New Museology* many more aspects of museum history and practice have come under scrutiny, including gender, race, class, how they construct history and their social role.

It is worth noting that The New Museology was not welcomed with open arms by the V&A. Anthony Burton reveals as much about his own attitude in 1999 as he does about the attitude in the V&A in the late 1980s when he writes:

When ... The New Museology appeared in 1989, attempting to apply new ideas to museums, a V&A reviewer found it 'vainglorious', its writers 'style victims, not independent thinkers ... mere epiphytes, producing theories which may be decorative, dull or irritating according to taste, but which sadly lack relevance, freshness and bottom.' (Jervis 1990) [The New Museology] was not particularly good, and the attacks of the highly intelligent V&A reviewers undoubtedly diminished their credibility. But the point is these books represented the direction that art history and museology might well take, (and, in the event, did take) in the future and the V&A could not afford to turn its back on them.  
(Burton 1999: 232)

Indeed, the V&A could not afford to ignore new trends in museum studies and curating. Museums were anxious about their future both in terms of the relevance of museums to contemporary life and about their ability to maintain themselves in times of reduced funding. These two issues were often linked. This comes across in a number of the essays in Vergo's book. For example, in his essay on Education, Entertainment and Politics, Paul Greenhalgh writes 'In these times of desperate financial pressure, the major museums of Britain more than ever before are concerned with their public role.' (Greenhalgh 1989: 74) Museums found themselves in a situation where they needed to justify their cost at a time when they were being criticised for their perceived elitism and old fashioned attitude. One of the V&A's responses to the increasing demands being placed upon it was to set up a Research Department, and Greenhalgh played an active role in it as Head of Research during the late 1990s.

Vergo argued that museums needed to be looked at more closely and studied from a wider variety of angles and explained how the ‘new museology’ should differ from the ‘old’.

‘old’ museology is...too much about museum methods, and too little about the purposes of museums; that museology has in the past only infrequently been seen, if it has been seen at all, as a theoretical or humanistic discipline and that the kinds of questions raised above have been all too rarely articulated let alone discussed.  
(Vergo 1989a: 3)

He pointed out that ‘The very act of collecting has a political or ideological or aesthetic dimension which cannot be overlooked. According to what criteria are works of art judged to be beautiful, or even historically significant’ (Vergo 1989a: 2). These issues are central to studying the African textiles in the V&A, and without people raising these issues in 1989 it is unlikely the V&A would be addressing them as it is now.

The New Museology did not arrive out of nowhere; it followed in the footsteps of The New Art History (Rees and Borzello 1986). Both of these books were a response to post-modern developments in cultural theory that had been going on for some time, particularly in the fields of literature and cultural history, which offered new ways of looking at things. For example, the idea of the social life or cultural biography of objects developed by Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff (1986) has been a useful tool for understanding objects in museums and their changing meanings.

Art history had been slow to respond to some of these developments but began to do so in the mid-eighties, museum studies was slower still but things began to change in the late 1980s and early 1990s. These developments would lead to changes in the

attitudes of museums. In 1992 Eileen Hooper-Greenhill acknowledged that museums had been through a period of difficult changes: ‘Change has been extreme and rapid, and, to many people who loved museums as they were, this change has seemed unprecedented, unexpected and unacceptable’ (Hooper-Greenhill 1992: 1). She argued though, that museums had ‘always had to modify how they worked, and what they did, according to the context, the plays of power, and the social, economic and political imperatives that surrounded them’ (Hooper-Greenhill 1992: 1). For Hooper-Greenhill the problem was not that museums had to change but that a lack of rigorous critical analysis meant they hadn’t reflected on their own role. Post-modern theorists such as Foucault and Gramsci offered Museum studies the tools to carry out this sort of analysis. By looking at some of the work of Hooper-Greenhill, Annie Coombes and James Clifford it is possible to see quite clearly how the kind of issues raised by them made studying the African textiles in the V&A collection possible.

Hooper-Greenhill sought to make use of developments in cultural history and in particular the work of Michel Foucault to analyse and understand museums; in particular two aspects of Foucault’s theory. Firstly, the rejection of the idea of absolute rationality (Foucault 1970: xv) and secondly “Effective History” (Foucault 1974). Foucault argued that forms of rationality and taxonomies of knowledge were historically specific rather than absolute. Furthermore, systems of knowledge were closely linked to power. He asked not only how was knowledge produced, but how has it been used by people to govern themselves and subjugate others. Knowledge was not only a result of a specific time and place, but shaped it too. Foucault’s theory of ‘Effective History’ was a view of the past that emphasised discontinuity and rupture rather than a progressive linear view of history. He was particularly interested



in the role of practices rather than theories or ideology. Hooper-Greenhill takes this on board and goes on to 'rewrite' the traditional history of the rise of museums.

An important aspect of the growth of museum studies was increased interest in how museums make displays about foreign cultures generally, and how to address the issue of dealing with material from countries that were once colonial subjects. In 1991 *Exhibiting Cultures: The poetics and politics of Museum Display*, focused on exhibiting foreign cultures in an age of multiculturalism (Karp and Lavine 1991). In the introduction Karp and Lavine pointed out that 'Decisions about how cultures are presented reflect deeper judgments of power and authority and can, indeed, resolve themselves into claims about what a nation is or ought to be' (Karp and Lavine 1991:1). They argued that although museum curators often acknowledged that there was a multiplicity of views on any subject this was rarely seen in the exhibitions themselves which continued to display a 'version of universalist aesthetics' (Karp and Lavine 1991: 4). While Karp and Lavine's work focused mostly on contemporary museum practice other writers have taken a historical approach to museum collections and display.

In 1994 Annie Coombes also made use of Foucault's theories and combined them with the work of post-colonial theorists. Post-colonial studies again arose in literary studies, but theories put forward by Spivak, Bhabha and Said were found to be useful by people from other disciplines. In 1997 Clifford also addressed the problems of displaying objects from cultures that have been colonised in the museum of the coloniser. The V&A's attitude towards Africa raised a slightly different issue; the

museum had to address the consequences and problems of not displaying objects from colonised cultures.

The V&A was not immune to these developments and, in fact, participated actively in them. In 1998 a book was published called *Colonialism and the Object: Empire, Material culture and the Museum*. This book grew out of the 1995 conference of the Association of Art Historians which was held at the V&A and edited by Tim Barringer and Tom Flynn. Tim Barringer had worked at the V&A. In the introduction to the book Barringer and Flynn wrote of studying Britain's national museums that '[t]he intersection between colonialism, museums and objects unites three major disciplinary areas, and three substantial bodies of contemporary theory: post-colonial theory, museum studies and material culture studies/design history' (Barringer and Flynn 1998: 2). This shows how these ideas were gaining ground in museum studies generally, Barringer went on to address some of these issues as they related specifically to the V&A in an article for the *Journal of Victorian Cultures* entitled, 'Re-presenting the Imperial Archive: South Kensington and its Museums' (Barringer 1998a).

In 1997 the V&A published *A Grand Design* (Baker and Richardson 1997) to accompany an exhibition of the same name. The book and exhibition aimed to explore how the museum had come about and how it had developed through the objects in its collection. In this book writers addressed the V&A collection in a great diversity of ways that would not have been possible without developments in museum studies and which in turn contributed to the ongoing development of the field.

Particularly useful for understanding the African textiles was a section of this book entitled 'The Empire of Things' by Partha Mittar and Craig Clunas which examined the collections in the V&A in the light of the relationship between museums and empire. In his essay for this section of the book Clunas wrote of the exclusion of African material due to its categorisation as ethnography (Clunas 1997: 230). As we have seen the division between art and ethnography did lead to the exclusion and removal of Sub-Saharan African material from the V&A. However, it is not a straightforward story and there were notable exceptions to the 'rule' of exclusion throughout the museum's history.

In conclusion, it is useful to return to the work of Hooper-Greenhill who pointed out that museums were actively engaged in the production of knowledge but was concerned that '[c]lassification in the museum has taken place within an ethos of obviousness. The selection and ordering processes of museums are rarely understood as historically and geographically specific, except at a very rudimentary level' (Hooper-Greenhill 1992: 5). Questioning the very systems of classification is a crucial aspect of understanding the African textile collection in the V&A. Hooper-Greenhill listed some questions that arise from questioning the assumptions behind the taxonomies museums use, and all of these are relevant to this study:

Do the existing systems of classification enable some ways of knowing, but prevent others? Are the exclusions, inclusions, and priorities that determine whether objects become part of collections, also creating systems of knowledge? Do the rituals and power relationships that allow some objects to be valued and other to be rejected operate to control the parameters of knowledge?  
(Hooper-Greenhill 1992: 5).

Hopefully answering these questions in relation the African textiles in the V&A will prove to be a useful exercise. We must acknowledge that African material has usually

been classed as 'ethnography' by British museums and this has led to certain understandings and perceptions of Africa to be perpetuated. The V&A's apparent exclusion of African artefacts contributed to this system of knowledge.

Mears points out that the idea that African material was not collected by the V&A was widely believed both within and outside the institution. However, as we have seen the 'exclusion' of African material from the V&A was not straightforward. The idea that African material should be excluded on the grounds of ethnography only becomes evident during the 1920s. In addition, the Circulation Department actively collected African textiles in the 1960s and did not regard design and ethnographic interest as mutually exclusive categories. The removal of a substantial proportion of African textiles from the V&A in 1992 was deemed 'non-controversial' because it was assumed African material was not and never had been part of the museum's collecting remit. This study of the African textiles that are (and were) in the V&A collection has tried to show that the exclusion of these objects created an understanding of the African textiles which in turn perpetuated the further exclusion and removal of other objects. Further, it has allowed an inaccurate rewriting of history that suggested and justified the idea that the V&A did not collect African material. It is only by questioning these assumptions and through detailed historical study that these ideas can be overturned.

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